

A PARANORMAL REVERSE HAREM SERIES



INFINITY
CHRONICLES

BOOK FOUR



ALBANY WALKER

INFINITY CHRONICLES BOOK
FOUR

ALBANY WALKER

ALBANY PUBLISHING

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Infinity Chronicles

A Paranormal Reverse Harem Story

Albany Walker

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✿ Created with Vellum

Dedicated

To Albany's Agents

Your support and kind words mean the world to me.

Thank you for being part of my journey.

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CHAPTER 1

“*W*hat the fuck were you thinking?” Ollie pushes his way past Dante and Ares. I expected the yelling to come from Ares, never Ollie. I shrink when Ollie stands in front of me with anger and disappointment clear on his face, but I think it’s masking his fear. He reaches for me, his hand grabbing my upper arm, and he drags me closer to him.

“Hey.” Milo pulls Ollie’s hand off my arm and glares at him. “Be careful.”

Ollie looks over at Milo, like he’s the one who has lost his mind. “You were supposed to watch her,” Ollie accuses, and shoves his palm into Milo’s shoulder.

I step to the left, coming between them. “It’s not his fault, Ollie. I went to the bathroom.”

“He should have been there.” Ollie narrows his eyes on his best friend, his lips in a tight line.

Milo doesn’t even try to defend himself. He looks down at the ground. “I should have stayed with you.”

“Fuck yes, you should have,” Ollie barks out, and gives Milo’s shoulder another shove.

“Knock it off, Ollie. It’s not his fault,” I argue again.

“Oliver.” Dante’s voice is stiff, barely more than a growl. I look over Ollie’s shoulder to find Ares in front of my mother, and she’s backed into a corner.

Her lips are lifting into what I would call a sneer as she glares at him with narrowed eyes.

I slip out from between Milo and Ollie and rush over to Ares's side. I should have realized there was a reason why he was so quiet. Dante is standing a few feet away, casting his gaze between the two groups.

"Ares, this is my mom," I tell him, incredulous that he has her backed into a corner like this.

"I don't care if she's the fucking queen. She's part of the reason Leon was here." His voice is deadly calm, and his eyes are full black as he meets her stare for stare.

"She was trying to warn me." I take a step closer to my mom, but Ares's hand snaps out and he clasps my wrist, his hold firm but not punishing, as he pulls me back, trying to tuck me behind him. "Ares," I gentle my tone, "she's my mom." I look over my shoulder.

My mom is staring at Ares's hand on my wrist, and the corners of her mouth turn down into a frown. With my free hand, I reach up and stroke over his knuckles. His hand releases immediately, but he takes a step closer to me, poised to pounce if my mom makes a move.

"Mom," I call out to her tentatively. She shakes out her long blonde hair, pushing it away from her face, and her eyes meet mine as she tips up her chin. "This is my Infinity."

She rolls her lips in and inhales a deep breath, her nostrils flaring. Her eyes skip from Ares over to Dante, then behind me to where Ollie and Milo are standing. Her eyes widen a bit as she takes in all four of them. A little of that manic, feverish look she would sometimes get when she knew we had to go out of the trailer falls over her features.

I take another step in her direction, ready to console her. Ares stops me with his arm barred across my stomach.

"We should get out of here. There are a lot of things we need to talk about," Ollie suggests, his voice still much harsher than I'm used to.

Her posture rigid, my mom stands at her full height. She's an inch or so shorter than I am, but it's the first time in a long time she hasn't seemed so small.

"The door's locked, we'll have to walk around," Dante comments, examining the flat panel door.

"I'll open it." Ares turns to face me. "You. Do not move from this spot. Do you understand?"

I take a step closer in Ares's direction, pushing my body into his space. I know he has the right to be worried, but I'm not going to let him treat me like

some naughty kid. “Next time, ask me politely.” I turn away from him and stomp over to stand halfway between Dante and the rear door just to prove a point.

In a blink, Ares is gone. The door pushes open from the inside in the very next second. Not looking at him, or any of the guys, I call out to my mom, “Come on, let’s get out of here.” She takes a tentative step in my direction, her eyes jumping between the guys as she does.

I reach my hand out as she nears, but she ignores my fingers. Under my breath, I mutter, “It’s okay, they’re usually very nice.”

She doesn’t acknowledge my statement, so I turn away before anyone can see the rejection on my face. I let my eyes close for a second, grateful that we escaped Leon without anyone getting hurt and grateful that my mother is here but scared for so many reasons.

“Come on, Muenster.” Ollie’s hand brushes down my arm, his voice is calm, sweet even, as he coaxes me to go through the door Ares is still holding open. It’s a major change since the last time he spoke. Milo and Dante follow us.

The door slams again, and I flinch from the sound. My hands begin to shake, and my teeth actually start to chatter. I bring both of my hands up to my face, cover my eyes, and let out a few long, rattling breaths. That could have gone down so differently.

Now that the adrenaline is gone, my body starts to crash. My knees feel loose, and I feel like the room is spinning even though my eyes are closed. I sense Dante moving in close behind me. He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me back, so I’m flush against him. His arms drape over mine, and he dips his head so I can feel him all around me. “It’s okay, Laura, just breathe.”

Almost collapsing, I lean into him hard. I keep my hands up to guard my face, because I’m not sure I want to know if my mom is judging me right now. Dante’s arms tightening is the only warning I have before he picks me up and turns us to face the opposite direction.

“Why don’t we find someplace we can talk?” Ares’s voice is stiff, but I can hear the effort he’s putting forward so he doesn’t sound like a suspicious brute.

“Laura!” my mom calls. She sounds worried, maybe even a little scared. She is so different from the woman she was when she was trying to face off with Leon.

“She’ll be along. Just give them a minute,” Ollie insists.

Dante releases his tight hold on me only long enough so he can step around me. He tips up my chin. “They’re gone, Laura. Look at me.” His forehead goes to mine, his breathing coming out like a soft pant.

I let my hands fall, but don’t open my eyes right away. Dante places a whisper soft kiss on my lips. “I’m so glad you’re okay.” His voice is hoarse as his words fall over my lips.

“I’m so sorry. I was coming to get you guys when he showed up, he threatened—”

Dante places his lips on mine again. “Shush, it’s okay. We’ll talk about it with the others.” His lips caress mine as he speaks. Dante brings his hands up and cradles my face in his palms. A soft sound rumbles out of his chest and his eyes close. He pushes his cheek against mine as his nose nuzzles into my neck. Releasing my face, his hands travel over my shoulders, down my arms and slide under, forcing my arms to loop around his neck. I lean up on my tiptoes to help with the height difference as he embraces me.

Dante’s entire body shudders as he squeezes me close. “We can’t lose you, Laura. It would kill us.”

I wince at his words. I feel exactly the same way, that’s why I had to protect them.

“I wasn’t planning on leaving with him, Dante. I just needed to get him away from you guys so he couldn’t hurt you.”

Dante pulls back, his hands circle my upper arms, and he jerks me away so he can see my face, hard enough that my teeth snap together. “You have to trust us, trust that we can take care of you, of ourselves.” His eyes are glowing orange as he growls the words. He pulls me back into his chest, not even noticing how rough he’s being.

I sink into him, I don’t mind. I know he’s acting out of fear and not anger. My arms are trapped between our bodies, so I grab a fistful of his shirt, clinging to him just as fiercely. I don’t tell him I would do it again if I thought that’s what needed to be done. I just let him hold me.



“WHERE IS MY DAUGHTER?” I hear my mother’s raised voice as Dante pounds on the hotel room door. We received a text about five minutes ago telling us

which room they would be in. Milo opens the door almost immediately. His face isn't exactly grim, but he doesn't look happy, either. He moves to stand next to the door as soon as we pass through, like some sort of bodyguard.

My mom stands, straightening from her position where she was perched on the back of the sofa. "Are you all right?" She moves as if she might come over to me but stops short. I peer over at Ares and Ollie, wondering if they noticed. Without an ounce of reservation, Ollie comes over to my side, wraps his arm around my back, and settles his hand over my hip.

I'm grateful for the support, but I feel a little strange having someone touch me in front of my mother—who has always insisted that I never let anyone close. "I'm okay. Are you?"

She pulls back physically and emotionally. I can tell by the way her eyes are glazing over, the way her jaw has gone a little slack. "Mom?"

She shakes her head then nods quickly. "Yes, I'm fine."

"You're fine?" I speak the words slowly. So many emotions are rolling through me that I can't even figure out which is strongest.

"Yes, fine." She nods again.

I throw my hands in the air. "I'm gonna need more than 'fine' this time, Mom. Where have you been? Why did you leave me? Why didn't you tell me about—" I jerk my hand back and forth. "Any of this?"

"I was trying to keep you safe." Her eyes fall to the floor as her shoulders shrink.

"You could have kept me safe and not lied to me my entire life," I spit, taking a step forward. Ollie's hand tightens on my hip.

"I did what I thought was best. I couldn't let him get his hands on you." She shrugs her shoulders like those simple words should be enough, but they aren't. They aren't nearly enough.

I jerk away from Ollie. Her calm, uninterested attitude is making me angry. "Well, you could have done a hell of a lot better," I grate out through my teeth.

My mom looks at me then, her head tilting to the side like I'm some sort of puzzle. "You're right," she utters, with no regret or remorse in her tone. She just states it like she already knows it.

My mouth falls open. I want to say something else, but words fail me.

Ares steps over then, stopping when he's right between my mom and me. I stare at his back as if I can still see her through him.

Ares's shoulders rise as he drags in a breath, preparing to speak. "Do not

try to manipulate me,” he warns.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she replies blandly, like we’re all crazy and she is patronizing us.

“I know you have the ability to alter perceptions. I’m telling you now: it would not be a good idea to try that with any of us.”

I hear a scoffing sound which I think came from my mother.

“Why don’t you tell us how you ended up back with Leon?” Ares continues, as if he didn’t even hear her contempt.

“I don’t need to tell *you* anything,” she argues.

“Amanda—” Ares starts, but Ollie interrupts.

“Are you hungry, thirsty?” His questions come as a bit of a surprise. I watch as he moves around Ares.

“We could call down and have them bring up some food,” Milo adds, taking a step farther into the room. I peer around Ares so I can see my mom. Her eyes are darting around, and she looks unsure.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm down. I can see how hard this is on her. The mom I know barely ever spoke to another person besides me, she hardly even left the camper. If I ever want to get any real answers from her, I need to handle this differently.

I shove down some of the anger and resentment I feel toward her, and step out from behind Ares so she can see me. Adopting the same calming tone I’ve always used when she was starting to spiral, I say, “Mom, this is Ollie, Oliver.” I place my hand on his forearm. Ollie lifts his other hand in a wave and gives her a tight smile. “Milo.” I make my way over to him and grab his fingers, dragging him closer to our group.

“Hello,” Milo intones, his chest puffed out as he nods in her direction.

“Dante,” Dante greets, before I have the chance to introduce him. His eyes are sharp as he looks her over.

“And Ares,” I continue, looking at him with what I hope is a warning to be nice.

“Ms. Fallen.” He gives her a slight chin jerk, but his lips are thinned.

I look over at my mom and see that her eyes are narrowed as she gazes at Ares. “All four of them. So, it’s true then?”

“Yes, all four of us.” Milo is the one to speak up. His arms are crossed over his chest, making his biceps look even larger than usual as he stares down at her.

“Is what true?” I ask, looking away from him.

“That you are connected to all of them. It’s not normal. Why you? Why them?” I furrow my brow at her questions, and the underlying tone of mistrust ringing clear in her words.

“I don’t know!” I scoff incredulously. “Like any of this is normal. Why not us?”

“What else?” Her eyes bulge and her brows rise.

I make my way over to the sofa and take a seat. Pinching the bridge of my nose with my left hand, I sigh. “What do you mean, what else, Mom?” I’m really trying to be patient. I’m trying to make this a little easier for her, but she’s not helping.

“What else is wrong with you—”

“Hey,” Ollie barks. “There is nothing wrong with her or our Infinity.”

I search my guys’ faces in the room. Ares looks like he’s biting his tongue, a tic pops on his jaw every few seconds. Dante’s chin is lowered, and he’s looking at her like he can’t decide if he wants to snap at her or not. Poor Milo keeps glancing back and forth between her and me, and his lips are parted like he doesn’t know what to say.

I need to get them back on track. “Mom, I’m not going to pretend to know what you went through with Leon, but my guys... these guys, I promise they aren’t anything like him. They would never hurt me, or you.” I peek over at Dante and Ares, making sure they get the message. My mom has been through enough. She’s not trying to be mean, she’s just scared.

With her eyes still on the other side of the room where they all stand, Mom scoots her way around the couch and comes over to sit near me. She doesn’t get too close, but she never really has, so that’s nothing new.

With one final glare sent in their direction, she turns to look at me. She studies my face, her eyes jerking back and forth as if she’s scanning me. After a few long seconds, her shoulders fall a little.

Instinct has me wanting to reach out to her—lay my hand on her arm, rub a comforting stroke over her back—but I don’t. Instead, I turn and angle my knees in her direction, giving her my full attention.

“There’s so much we need to talk about, so much has changed.” I examine her much the same as she has me. “You look so different,” I blurt.

A flush blooms on her cheeks, and her eyes dart to the ground. “I haven’t been taking very good care of us,” she admits, keeping her head down but looking up at me.

A pang of something sits just over my stomach. “We did okay,” I offer in

a small voice.

Mom's lips curve into a tight, makeshift smile. "No, *you* did okay, better than okay, Laura."

I'm the one who looks down this time. I feel her chilled finger brush across the top of my hand. I jerk my head up at her touch and see her pulling her hand back to her lap. That little touch is the first time she has reached out to me in a long time. A frisson of hope fills my chest. I know we have a lot to talk about, but for the first time I let the relief I feel for having found her—or for her finding me—fill me.

"I'm going to call down and let our parents know that everything is okay." Ares pulls his phone from his pocket and makes his way to the double doors across the room.

"Have them bring up some food and stuff." Ollie looks at my mom. She's way too thin. I stare down at my thighs, wondering if that's what I looked like when I first met them months ago.

Ares nods his head as he moves out of earshot and into the large bedroom, but he leaves the door open. Silence falls over us. I shift on the couch, unsure of what to say to my mom. Should I ask her about Leon, about why she left with him?

Dante stalks across the room and leans against the back of the sofa, with his body turned in my mom's direction. I watch her face as he folds his arms over his chest and gives her a broody glare. I don't even think he can help it at this point. A few more seconds of silence tick by, none of us seem to know what to say or do next.

I open my mouth then close it, still at a loss. A few words from Ares's mumbled conversation reaches my ears. I tilt my head and my ear twitches. Dante makes a grunting sound behind me.

I peer up at him, but he's still staring at my mom, who is watching at me. I flush, knowing she saw what I was doing. Using the guys' abilities has become second nature to me, and I didn't even think twice about using those gifts to hear Ares's conversation.

"We will have company soon," Ares announces, as he strolls back into the room and slides his phone into his pocket. He leaves his hand tucked inside and looks over all of us.

"Who?" I question.

"Our parents."

"All of them?" Milo sounds hesitant.

“No, just Rosa, Mal, and William.” Ares walks over toward the suite door.

“Rosa, is your mother? Ares...” She says his name slowly, like the memory of his name is tickling her mind. She looks over at me then back to Ares. He’s ignoring her for the most part. It’s probably better that way. I don’t think Ares is very practiced at being nice to people he isn’t happy with.

“Yes, she is our mother,” Dante answers for him.

“Wait, both of you?” she murmurs incredulously, her eyes searching the ground.

Dante takes a deep breath. “Yes.”

“I haven’t seen Rosa since...” She trails off, not finishing her sentence.

“Yeah, well, she told us what she knew about you and Leon, which wasn’t much I’m afraid,” Ares adds as he waits near the door for his parents to arrive.

“She helped me.” Mom looks down at her palms, like she’s expecting to find something there.

“If you were so worried about all of this, about keeping me from finding out what I was, why did you bring us back here?” I blurt, finally settling on a question. I need to understand what she was thinking.

Her hands ball into fists. “I tried to stay away, but I knew what I was doing was wrong.” She glances up at me briefly before her eyes dart back down to her hands.

“I had no idea if Rosa still even lived here. I did know my parents were gone.” Her voice goes flat. “I’ve been running for so long, I’m so tired.”

I scoot a little closer to her on the couch. “I’m glad you brought me here, Mom I wish... I wish you would have told me the truth. Maybe if you had been honest with me, I would have understood better, helped you more.”

“Laura, it was never your job to help me.” She looks up, her eyes unfocused as she gazes across the room. “When I first left, I was so busy trying to keep us safe and pretending everything was normal, that I didn’t have time to worry about anything else.”

She starts picking at the skin on the side of her thumbnail. “But after you were born...” Her eyes close and she shakes her head. “You looked so much like him, every time I looked at you, he was all I could see.”

I shrink back into myself. Dante’s palm lands on my back, and when I look up, I see that Milo and Ollie have moved closer.

“Every single day you reminded me of what I lost. I hated myself for

feeling like that, but I couldn't stop it either. You would go off to school, and I would go to work, and I would think about how much I loved you, how important you were, but then..."

"You would see me and hate what I represented."

"No, Laura, I never hated you. I hated myself, I hated the fact that I let Leon kill your father."

CHAPTER 2

“*M*y father? But I thought Leon was my father?”
A sneer falls over my mother’s face. “No.” She shakes her head vehemently. “Wyatt was your father. Leon, he was wrong... so wrong.”

Dante’s fingers cup my shoulder, and he squeezes. A light tapping on the door draws my attention before it’s pushed open. Rosa looks hesitantly into the room, her eyes settling quickly on my mom.

“Mandy,” Rosa murmurs as she walks into the room but stops short of coming all the way over to the sofa.

My mom lets out a shaky breath and pushes herself up to stand. “Rosa,” she responds, her voice thick with emotion.

They stare at each other, not speaking, but somehow so much is exchanged between them. It’s Rosa who makes the first move after several long moments of stunned silence. She lifts her arms with a sheen of tears shining in her eyes and beckons my mom to her.

The first step is slow, but once that initial hesitation is gone, my mom closes the short distance between them.

When she lets Rosa wrap her arms around her and she settles her face just under Rosa’s neck, I feel like I’m seeing a whole new version of my mom. Milo takes the opportunity to slide into the seat she vacated, his large palm landing on my knee.

I know the shock must be clear on my face when I glance over at the guys, almost asking if they are seeing what I am. My mom rarely ever touched me in a loving manner, would almost do anything to avoid a simple everyday touch. Living in such small quarters, it was glaringly obvious that

she was evading me. Yet, here she is, looking completely comfortable in the Rosa's embrace.

A few whispered words are exchanged between the two women. Mal makes his way over to the small bar and pours four glasses of liquid. There were only three unused glasses left, so when my mom finally pulls away from Rosa, he keeps a thin plastic cup for himself after passing out the others to all the parents in the room.

Head held a little higher, my mom takes another look around. She glances at everyone's faces but lingers on mine. "I came back here because I knew I needed help. But I never would have returned had I known it would lead to this."

A sliver of hurt pierces my chest. I reach over for Dante's and Milo's hands simultaneously. I have absolutely no regrets about coming here. I have my mom back and found the four most important people in my life. I couldn't regret it if I tried.

"Mom, this is where I'm supposed to be, where I want to be."

"If we'd never come here, Leon would have never known about you." Her eyes plead for me to understand.

"If we had never come here, I wouldn't have this." I raise both of my hands, which are still wrapped in Milo and Dante's. "I would still be all alone."

Mom takes one small step closer. "You weren't alone; you had me."

"Did I? Because I don't even think I know who you are." Ares settles himself so he's halfway between her and me. It's a move obviously calculated to protect me from her.

Mom's foot slides back on the carpet as she shrinks in on herself. I don't think that it's Ares's mere presence that has her retreating. No, I think it's her inability to argue the truth I just spoke.

"We should talk about what kind of threat Leon poses right now. I think that's what we should be focusing on," Ares suggests.

My mom nods, her eyes falling closed as she concedes.

But I can't just let it go, not yet. "How did coming back here help him find us?"

Mom sighs. "I don't know how much you know, but my parents..." She pauses, and clears her throat, then shakes out her hair. "I'm from this area. I guess he had someone watching to see if I would ever return." It's clear by her tone that she's only making an assumption. She glances over at Ollie in

suspicion. He's the farthest away from the group, standing with his arms crossed over his chest as he glares at my mother.

"If you think we had something to do with him finding you, then you can fuck off," Dante snarls, pulling her attention from Ollie.

"Dante Luca Costa," Rosa chastises.

Ollie snickers behind us, but I ignore him. Instead, I squeeze Dante's hand and tip my head in his direction, but his eyes are glued to my mom, an orangish glow highlighting his irises.

This is not at all how I expected her return to go. "So, Leon, he took you from the RV?" I need to get this conversation back on track before someone says something they'll regret.

Mal and William move in closer to Rosa now that she and my mom are no longer embracing. Ares is still angled between Mom and me, but I can see her around him when she rolls the tumbler—from which she hasn't taken a sip—between her palms. "He didn't, he had a woman come to the door. I knew I shouldn't have opened it, but she had a bruise over her eye, and she really looked like she needed help." She lets out a small groan at how easily she was fooled.

"It was like she was just confirming who I was. As soon as she saw me, she mumbled that she was fine, to forget it, and walked away back in the direction of the entrance of the park. I knew I had made a mistake immediately."

"Then?" Ares prompts.

"I waited until the next day, a few hours after Laura left for school, and walked out of the camper. He picked me up before I made it to the road." Mom shifts her shoulders in a shrug.

"Why did you go to him? Why didn't you just move us again?" I'm trying to make sense of this, but I just can't understand why, after she ran from him for so long, she would go to him now.

"I thought if I went back, I could keep him from finding out about you," she tells me, like it's an obvious answer, and I should have realized it on my own.

"I should have gone the same day the woman showed up, and because I didn't, Leon saw you come home from work that night then go to school the next morning. As soon as I realized he already knew about you, I made sure to keep him busy. Every time he turned around, I was trying to escape, fighting him, doing anything I could so he didn't have time to pursue you."

My back falls against the sofa cushion. Releasing Dante's and Milo's hands, I cover my eyes with my palm while I squeeze my temples between my thumb and middle finger. "I wish you would have just told me all of this from the beginning."

"Maybe I should have, but what would it have changed?"

I peer up at my mom. There's a flush to her cheeks and her eyes are bright, but a little bloodshot.

"We could have helped you, Mandy," Rosa offers.

Mom spins to face her friend. "And risk dragging you all into this, too? Never. You have no idea how crazy he is."

"Tell us," Ares demands.

Mom's lips thin as she shakes her head in denial. "He killed Wyatt," she proclaims, like that should tell us everything, "just because he wanted his power. Wyatt was a mimic."

Ollie sucks in a breath, almost a whistle. "Holy shit." His eyes land on mine and they widen.

"Why did Leon think if he killed Wyatt that he would gain his abilities?" Ares rushes to ask, and with his hand tipped back in Ollie's direction, he makes a fist. Ollie looks at Ares's fist and his lips thin as he rolls them in, keeping quiet.

"Because he was crazy," Mom declares, her arms spread out to her sides.

"Yes, but what exactly did he do that made him think he was going to receive Wyatt's abilities if he killed him?" Ares's tone is a little more patient.

Dante shifts next to me, his thigh pressed against mine from hip to knee. Milo leans forward so his elbows are braced on his thighs.

"I don't know." Mom shakes her head, her eyes glazed in thought. "Wyatt, we always had this connection from the moment I met him. I never really had that with Leon. I mean, the signs were there, same identifier, but with Wyatt I got this feeling—like electricity dancing on my skin when he would touch me." Her eyes close like she's thinking back.

She tips her chin down, continuing, "I never had that with Leon. It was like something inside me," Mom fists one hand over her chest, "knew there was something terribly wrong with him."

Ares lifts his hand and covers his mouth. He pulls down, stroking the short stubble on his chin in a sign of frustration. "Did it work? Whatever he did, did it work?"

Mom looks up and meets Ares's eyes. "I don't know. He made me

believe it did, but that's not even possible, right?" She widens her arms and looks around, hoping someone will have an answer.

"We don't know either," Mal tells her. "Leon, he pretended everything was fine after you left. It was only after the incident at your parents' that everyone realized something was very wrong. He was thought to have died with them that day."

"The council did an investigation. He had several norms on his staff. It was easy enough to find out what he'd been up to, but no one had any solid details—none of the people who were investigated anyway," William adds.

"Everyone thought he killed you, too. We didn't tell them any different, because we didn't know if you were still alive." Rosa steps forward and clasps my mom's hand. "We didn't know where you were, if he had gotten to you."

Mom gazes at Rosa with a sad smile on her lips. "I couldn't come back, Rosa; I couldn't risk you, Ares, or the guys. I had already put you in too much danger when I came to you the first time, but I was desperate." She reaches up with her other hand and folds that over the top of Rosa's. "And you helped me so much, so much." She licks her top lip as a tear falls. "That money you gave me helped me survive for years."

Rosa's lips turn down. "We could have done more, protected you." Mom is already shaking her head in denial.

"I couldn't, Rosa. I had already lost so much. I couldn't do that to you, not to any of you." Mom looks at Mal and William.

Silence falls and the couch shifts as Dante rearranges himself again. "What about today? If you've been trying to protect Laura, how did you end up here with him today?"

I drop my hand to Dante's thigh and squeeze, drawing his attention. "She told me to run, she was warning me he was coming." I look over at my mom and our eyes meet.

"I did. I was hoping to get her out of here, away from all of this." Mom winces.

Dante lets out a low growl of a noise while Ares's back goes rigid. "I didn't know who her Infinity was, I still don't know any of you. I was doing what I thought was right to keep her safe," she defends.

"Mandy, my boys—these boys—they would never hurt her. What you went through, that's not what Infinities are about. You know that, Mandy, you've always known that," Rosa urges.

My mom tips her head back, closing her eyes briefly, and nods.

“Leon brought me here to get her to come willingly.” She lifts her hand to stop Ollie from talking when he opens his mouth to argue. “I was never planning on taking her back to him,” she adds.

Ollie makes a few grumbling noises in response.

“Where was he going to take her? Where is he staying?” Ares latches on to the opportunity to gather more information.

“I don’t know—a house?” Mom shrugs looking around. “It was only about twenty-five minutes from the RV park. Maybe forty minutes from here.” Her grimace shows her frustration that she is unable to be more helpful.

“Why go after her? He had you, what does he want with Laura?” Milo chimes in.

Mom purses her lips. “At first, I thought it was just because he was hoping she was his daughter,” she sneers. “I think he knew he could control me through her, but after today...” Mom shakes out her hands and forms fists. “I don’t know. The way he looked at her, it was like he knew she had something he wanted.”

Ares spins and faces me. “What abilities does he know about?” he demands.

“Shadows...” Ares nods, encouraging me to continue. I look down, and add, “My animal.” I can’t really say tiger, since I don’t fully shift. “And... the electricity, but he might not know that one though. I didn’t use it, but I pulled on the power.”

Ares just stares at me as a myriad of emotions flit through his eyes. Dante places his hand over mine, which is still on his thigh. “If Leon thinks he can take people’s abilities and Laura has more than one ability...” Dante looks over at me. “He’s really going to want her now.”

“Fuck!” Ares barks, as he turns on his heel and pulls his phone out of his pocket. He pauses before he reaches the bedroom door and looks back at each of our Infinity. “I’m going to handle this,” he states before he disappears through the door.

“What should we do now?” I whisper, but no one has an answer.



“SHOULD WE REALLY BE GOING HOME?” Milo questions Ares. “Your parents’ place already has an alarm and a security set-up.”

Ares’s grip on the steering wheel tightens as he looks in the rearview mirror. “It also has Amanda.” His eyes dart in my direction.

Ollie leans forward so he’s between the front seats. “As far as we know, he doesn’t know about the new place, right?”

“It wouldn’t be hard to find it. It’s a matter of public record. Anyone can get that information with a couple of keystrokes. I should have put it under a corporation name, but I didn’t,” Ares answers, his eyes darting to all the mirrors one by one. Ollie falls back, a huff escaping his lips.

“How are we playing this when we get home?” Dante asks.

“I’m going to drop you off about a mile before the house. I want you to make sure no one has been there.” What Ares doesn’t say is that he expects Dante to shift so his senses will be much stronger. “If you even think someone is or has been there, meet us at the road before the driveway.” I sit in the front seat, wondering why it has to be like this. I wish I could just pretend my mom went on a little trip, and now she’s back and everything will be fine.

“I don’t want anyone to get hurt because of me,” I mutter, staring out the window. It’s too dark to see anything, except the slight reflection of my shoulder in the glass.

“No one is going to get hurt, *Cara*.”

“You don’t know that. He could—”

“He couldn’t,” Ares interrupts. “No matter what he tries, if he does, we will be ready.”

“He’s right, Muenster. Leon isn’t a threat—especially now that we know what to expect,” Ollie confirms.

I don’t feel any sense of relief. Desperate people do desperate things.

The car slows to a stop. “I’ll give you five minutes before I head up.” Ares looks at Dante, who’s sitting behind me. “If anything is off, come back here, do not engage. The only danger we’d face would be if he separates us.”

My heart starts beating harder, and I can’t bring myself to look behind me. Ares directs his attention back to the windshield, obsessively checking his mirrors again as he hits a button for the hazard lights to turn on.

The rear door opens and Dante steps out. I turn to watch him as he strips out of his shirt, and a wave of longing comes over me. He shouldn’t go alone. I roll down my window. “Dante,” I croak, and his eyes jump to mine. His

hands are already at the waistband of his dark pants. I study the lines of his muscles over his torso, the smattering of hair I can barely see in the darkness. “Be safe, come back to me,” I tell him softly. “Promise?”

Dante steps forward and leans so his forearm is on the top of the car door. “I promise. Don’t worry, five minutes.” A wrinkle mars his forehead as he raises his brows.

I take a heavy breath and blow it out through my puffed-up cheeks. Dante leans in through the window and seals his lips to mine. I’m usually the instigator with Dante, but this time he dominates my lips as he shoves his tongue right into my mouth. I let out a low groan and nip his tongue in retaliation. He pulls back with a wicked smile on his lips as his tongue leaves a trail of red on his plump bottom lip. If he didn’t have his head halfway in the car, I would have never even seen it.

Heat coils low in my stomach. *Mine* echoes in my thoughts. Dante taps the top of the car twice before slipping into the darkness. I can make out his outline as he shucks his pants and socks off, his shoes must still be in the backseat. Then he’s gone, and not even my enhanced vision can find him.

“We should grab his clothes,” I suggest with a sigh.

“I’ll do it,” Milo offers, climbing out to the edge of the road. “I didn’t find any boxers, so those are a lost cause unless someone else wants to go searching.”

“I don’t think he had any.” I let my head tilt against the doorframe, my eyes on the clock on the radio.

Ollie chuckles. “Free-ballin’ bastard.”



I’M ALREADY antsy and two minutes hasn’t even passed. I’ve rearranged the seat and my body several times.

Milo settles his hand on my shoulder from the backseat. “Just a little longer, Laura. We would know if there were a problem,” he assures me calmly.

Three more minutes pass like the seconds have somehow tripled. Ares hits the button for the hazards to shut them off and turns the dial to D. He checks his mirrors again, but I haven’t seen a single headlight since we’ve been parked here.

Slowly, he merges back into the traffic lane. I can't stop the bounce of my leg as we get closer to the driveway. The headlights finally shine on the little, florescent-green triangle Milo put up the other day so we could find the drive easily, and I instantly start looking for Dante. "I don't see him, do you?"

Ares slows the vehicle, his head lowered to see out the window. As he spins the wheel to turn into the drive, I catch a glimpse of Dante in his tiger form. His head is up as he sniffs the air, and when he lowers it, he yawns. His huge maw opens wide enough to see every single sharp tooth he has glistening in the beams of the headlights. Ares slowly drives up the gravel path with Dante loping up next to us, his fur shifting and swaying with every bound.

I have my hand on the door handle before we even make it all the way up the driveway. As soon as we roll to a stop, I open the door and hop out. Dante is there to meet me, and he immediately drags the side of his face over my hip and stomach, bobbing his head up and down a few times as he nuzzles me. I drop my hands to his head, digging my fingers into the thick fur around his ears and face.

"Anything?" Ares asks, as he comes around the car with his eyes focused on the house above us. Dante drops down to a seated position and shakes his head, letting out a big sneeze or chuff. Still stroking my hand over Dante's head and neck, I glance up at the house. Nothing seems off. I think back to the feeling of wrongness I felt that day back at the camper, how I knew something was wrong as soon as we walked inside.

"What is Leon's ability?" I can't believe I haven't thought to ask this before.

"Object manipulation, which makes sense," Milo answers casually. His hands are loose down at his sides, but I swear the width of his shoulders has somehow grown. He's staring up at the house too, his eyes narrowed.

The headlights of the SUV blink off, and I fist my hand in Dante's fur. He leans his head into my hip, pushing against me and reminding me he's there. I release my grip but keep my hand on him.

"The ring box," I state, remembering how horrible it made the whole RV feel.

"Yes," Ares replies.

"But what does that mean? He can touch something and make it give off bad vibes?" My voice is low, the darkness and quiet making me feel like I need to whisper.

“You and Dante were the only ones who sensed the *bad vibes*,” Ares reminds me. “If neither of you had been there and I had picked up the box, I’m not sure what the consequences would have been. Whatever he did to the box might have transferred to me.”

“Shit,” I hiss.

“Sums it up pretty well,” Ollie says with forced lightheartedness.

“So, how we doing this?” Milo tilts his head from left to right.

“We all go in together. We all stay together. We check each room.” Ares turns so he’s facing us with his back to the house. “We go in through the garage. Dante, you’re on point. You’ll know if anything has been fucked with. Laura, you’re in the middle. I need you to make sure Dante doesn’t miss anything.”

I bite the inside of my lip, and my breathing is already heavy considering I’m just standing here. “Ollie, your abilities are a last resort, especially once we’re inside.” Milo cracks his knuckles once Ares focuses on him. “No holding back, Milo. You take the rear.” That’s all he tells him, but he’s saying so much more.

We fall into a line with Dante in front and Ares behind him, while I’m tucked between him and Ollie, with Milo in position behind us. Ares points the garage door opener at the house and the door rumbles to life, lifting to reveal even more inky darkness. Reaching forward, I grip the waistband of the back of Ares’s pants, since his shirt is tucked in without any extra fabric to hold.

The urge to pee hits me hard. One good scare and I’ll probably piss myself. Luckily, I’m distracted from that thought as Dante’s nose lifts to scent the air. After a long second, he moves forward, his head now low as he prowls closer to the house. If I weren’t so scared, it would be amazing to watch him.

We make our way through the garage to the steep stairs that lead up to the kitchen. Ares holds his hand up with his fist closed tight. We freeze.

I sense the moment his essence leaves his body. A chilled breeze lifts my hair and wraps around my neck, before sweeping past me and up the stairs. Is that how he always knows when I’m watching him?

In seconds he’s back, the heat of his body warming with his return. He jerks his head toward us, and says, “No one is in the house. Same protocol. Dante and Laura, clear each room.”

My shoulders relax now that I know there isn’t an ambush waiting for us.

“Why didn’t you say you were going to do that?” I try to pinch Ares’s side, but I end up just digging my fingers into his tight obliques.

“Take every advantage, *Cara*. I don’t want anyone knowing what I’m truly capable of until it’s too late for them.” I think back to the first time I saw him emerging from the shadows. Dangerous was my first thought, and it’s still very true.

CHAPTER 3

“*W*hat are we going to do? We can’t live like this.” I’m tucked between Ollie and Milo in our upstairs bedroom. Dante and Ares are downstairs keeping an eye on the house.

“Ares will have his security team here tomorrow.” Ollie presses his lips to my forehead.

I tug the blanket higher up on my chest. Ollie is throwing off enough heat to warm the whole house, but I still feel chilled.

Milo turns on his side and faces me, his eyes searching my face. I watch as he licks over his bottom lip and swallows heavily. “I’m sorry I let you go alone.” A little piece of my heart cracks at the regret in his voice.

“Milo, don’t apologize. It’s not your fault.” I turn onto my side to look at him, scooting a little closer in the process.

“He never would have gotten you as far as he did if I would have been with you.”

My lips tighten into a hard line. “Yes, but then we still wouldn’t know he was after me. He could have grabbed me when I was at school or work, too far away from you guys. You’d never have known. But now we can be prepared.”

“I still fucked up.” He closes his eyes and his jaw clenches.

I lean forward and place my lips over his in a soft caress. Pulling back, I tell him, “Milo, I’m here because you came for me. You found me before he could do anything.”

Milo’s hand comes up, and his palm cradles my cheek. I can feel the calluses on his fingers as he skates them over my face. His dark blue eyes search mine before he bites his bottom lip, releasing it gently.

Leaning in ever so slowly, he kisses me. It's sweet and gentle—just like he is. My heart thuds, then speeds up as he licks the seam of my lips. I open my mouth, my tongue reaching for his the second he enters.

I'd all but forgotten that Ollie is next to me until I feel the bed shift. He wraps his body behind mine, keeping his hand low on my thigh. Milo's kisses get more urgent—still sweet—but his lips are pressed firmly against mine as his hand moves down until he reaches my hip. His fingertips flex over my butt, and his thumb digs into the hollow of my hip. A low moan escapes me, it's the first time his touch has ever felt unguarded.

Ollie hooks his hand under my knee and lifts my leg so it goes over Milo's waist. I feel his tongue make a long, lazy swipe up the back of my neck, and my inner muscles clench with need.

Milo tilts his head, taking the kiss even deeper, and he rocks his hips forward, but I'm not close enough to feel him the way I need to. Wrapping my calf around his butt, I pull myself closer, and when our bodies line up, Milo lets out a long groan. He throws his head back, and his eyes close as his lips part. I swivel my hips until I can feel the blunt tip of his erection right where I need it.

Ollie sighs into my ear, his breaths short and panting. Milo meets my hips, rolling against me. Pushing my lips against Milo's throat, I lick and suck as we rock together. Ollie's heat disappears, but I don't have a chance to wonder where he's gone before he's back, lining himself up right behind me.

I brush my hands over Milo's chest until I reach the hem of his shirt. I walk the tips of my fingers under the fabric, pressing my fingertips into each groove between the slabs of his muscles. When I reach his chest, my thumb brushes against his pebbled nipple. It's small compared to mine, but fascinating.

Milo's hips jerk, and he drags me closer. I let out a shaky breath. This is the Milo I need, the one who feels instead of thinks. I stroke down his side until I reach the loose gym shorts at his waist. He makes a sound close to a whimper when I guide my hand inside the front of his shorts.

He's hot, burning, when I feel his hardness in my hand. Reaching down farther, I gasp as I feel all of him, he's not nearly as long as Ares but, damn, he's thick. Wrapping my fingers around him, I squeeze. Milo slams his lips onto mine. Any reservations about how much he wants me are gone when his hand lands on my ass, forcing my hips forward and grinding into my palm between our bodies.

I take my hand off him long enough to push his shorts down, and Milo hastily removes them from his legs, kicking them the rest of the way off. He leans up on his elbow and freezes. I know it's the moment he sees Ollie, remembering he's right behind me.

"Milo," I coo his name, begging him not to stop.

With his eyes still on Ollie, he reaches for the hem of my shirt. I help him get it the rest of the way off and lie back down between them.

With shaking hands, Ollie slides his fingers into my sleep shorts and pushes them down my hips, taking my underwear with them. Once they're gone, he lifts a foil packet, extending his hand in Milo's direction. Milo looks down at me with a deep hunger in his eyes.

"Are you sure?" Milo's voice is thick.

I jerk my chin up and down, looking right into his eyes. Ollie opens the packet, then mutters to Milo, "Lay down."

Milo drops his torso back to the mattress, his breathing erratic as his chest heaves. My knee is still over Milo's hip, and I feel Ollie's hands between my legs as he reaches for Milo.

Milo screws his eyes tightly shut, but his lips part with a heavy sigh. I feel small touches as Ollie's fingers brush against me while he rolls the condom onto Milo.

Once he's done, he wraps his body around mine again and kisses my shoulder. His hips are pulled back, but I still feel his wrist under my butt. After a few seconds, Milo leans back in and starts again with gentle kisses. I answer him with needy kisses in return. Before long, I'm rocking against him and craving so much more than just his mouth on mine.

Another brush of Ollie's fingers, and he's parting me, the tip of one finger circling around my clit. Just as my hips begin to follow his movements, he pulls back and slides one long finger inside me. I moan into Milo's mouth, and his grip tightens as he rocks forward.

Ollie pulls his finger out of me, and I clench my muscles on instinct. I break the kiss with Milo and look down between our bodies to see Ollie's hand reaching past me to wrap around Milo's erection. His fingers don't even meet as he delivers a stroke over the condom. Lust settles low in my stomach. Holy hell, I need them.

Ollie guides Milo's erection to my center, sliding it up and down a few times before he puts him near my opening. My heart is beating so fast I feel like I might pass out. Ollie's hand lowers until I can't see it anymore, but

Milo makes a strangled sound.

“I’m going to come,” Milo grits out. “I’ve never—this is too much.”

I slide myself closer to Milo, desperate to feel him inside me. His eyes pop open, and he looks at me. Biting his lip, Milo rolls his hips, and he slides inside of me. My head falls back, and a loud moan drops from my lips as he stretches me. I can still feel Ollie’s fingers alternating between touching me and Milo. After only four strokes, Milo mumbles, “Not gonna last. So, fucking good.” His arm comes around my back, and he squeezes our chests together so tightly, I can barely breathe, but I don’t even care. Ollie’s fingers are on either side of Milo’s erection and brushing against my clit with each stroke.

Milo buries his face in my hair and lets out a long groan, his body shoved as deep as possible in mine. I can actually feel him jerking as he comes.

“Holy fuck,” Ollie mutters, as his fingers push against my clit. My orgasm hits me just as a heavy weight crashes into my bones.

I jerk, and then I freeze as my body grows impossibly heavy. The taste of iron fills my mouth as my back bows clear off the bed. Milo slips from my body. My eyes are open, but I can’t see anything as my entire universe shifts. In the blink of an eye, every lingering doubt about our Infinity vanishes. Our bond is Infinite. We are complete. I’m out cold before my back hits the mattress.



I ROUSE to hear Ares’s strained voice. “What do you mean you don’t know what happened?” I lift my eyelids, though they seem heavy.

“Don’t yell at them, Dark Lord.” My words are slurred, but understandable.

“*Cara*, are you okay?”

I stretch, only now realizing I’m still naked. I peek my eyes open again, a flush covering my cheeks. “May I have the sheet?” I blurt, as all four of them stare down at me.

Milo, in only his loose shorts, throws the sheet over me. “Sorry,” he mumbles when it even covers my head.

“It’s okay.” I poke my head out and use my hands to tame my hair. Ollie coughs or, more likely, covers a laugh with a cough. When I look over at

him, he holds his hands out near his head and mouths, “Pillow perm,” to me while nodding his head, obviously proud of himself. I huff and roll my eyes.

“What happened?” Dante asks, not even noticing Ollie.

“I bonded to Milo. Our Infinity is complete,” I answer, just as confused as they are.

“We know that—we all felt it—but you’ve been out for twenty minutes,” Ares counters.

I shrug, keeping the sheet to my chest as I move to sit up. “I don’t know, nothing bad happened, although my body feels different, heavy.” I wince as I try to scoot my back to the wall, a simple movement I’d normally do without a thought.

Milo’s eyes widen, and he jerks his head and looks over at Ares. “Here, squeeze my arm.” He steps forward, offering his forearm.

“Why?” I look at him skeptically but grab his arm. I squeeze as hard as I can, but he doesn’t even look like it registered. His brows drop down as he looks over his shoulder at Ares.

“Someone else let her try. It just feels normal to me, but... just let her try on one of you,” Milo blurts standing back.

Dante extends his arm to me, licking his lips as he gets unnecessarily close. Orange flares in his irises. I reach for him, hungry for him even though I just made love to Milo.

My fingers brush against his mark on his wrist. I stroke my hand up his inner elbow, watching my nails drag up his arm. Looking up, I make eye contact with him and wrap my fingers around his bicep. I squeeze, but nothing happens, I don’t feel any stronger than I did an hour ago.

“Her touch is powerful, but nothing like Milo’s.” Dante’s raspy voice fills my ears as he skims his hand over his chest, while his other arm is still locked in my grasp.

“We need to focus.” Ares steps up to the side of the bed and pulls Dante’s arm from my grip. A sneer lifts my lips.

“Mine,” I growl. Dante spins so his back is to me and my eyes jump up to Ares’s. There’s no challenge there, only his patient stare.

“Sorry,” I apologize with a wince.

“Are you experiencing anything else?” Ares queries, ignoring my comment. I don’t tell him that I was ready to jump Dante a few seconds ago. I’ve come to understand that his and my relationship is a little different than the others. Instead, I take a deep breath, really thinking about how I feel.

After a long pause, I shake my head. “I feel fine, good. Still kind of heavy, but maybe I’m just a little tired?” I offer.

Dante turns back around to face me, his eyes back to the beautiful amber I know. I give him a small smile.

Ares looks over at Milo. “Any other ideas?”

Milo’s eyes narrow and his lips are pursed. “Maybe, but I don’t know how we’d test it.” He looks over at Ares.

“Tell me what you’re thinking.” Ares crosses his arms over his chest.

Milo drags his hand through his hair, pushing it back from his forehead, his bicep bulges in response. “Instead of being physically stronger, maybe her body is stronger. That might explain why she feels heavy.” He widens his palms like he’s grasping for straws. Ares returns his gaze to me, his head tilting in contemplation.

“Milo’s right, there’s no way to test that theory. It’s not like one of us could hit her.” Ollie walks around the bed before dropping himself on the opposite side.

“Absolutely not!” Milo barks.

“And not what I was suggesting,” Ollie retorts.

Using my forearms to hold the sheet in place, I squeeze my wrist with my hand. I blink when I don’t feel the pressure. Wait, wait this isn’t good. I squeeze again as hard as I can. I see the indent my fingers are making, but I don’t feel a damn thing. What if I can’t feel anyone’s touch again? I’m being irrational, I just felt Dante only moments ago, but I’m frightened anyway. “Touch me!” I blurt, extending both arms out. The sheet falls to my lap and no one makes a move. I climb off the bed, almost frantic. I’ve barely had anyone touch me my entire life, please don’t take it away from me now.

“Please, touch me.” I reach for Dante, since he’s the closest. He swallows before looking over at Ares, then back down at me. With one finger poised in the air, he gently traces the pad of his finger over the crest of my shoulder and down my arm. My head falls back in relief as gooseflesh grows in its wake. “Thank God,” I sigh.

Looking behind me, I see Ares drop the sheet over my shoulders, but I can’t feel the fabric at all. Dread settles in my stomach until his fingers graze over my neck as he tucks it around me. I can’t feel anything but their touch.

Dante pauses, his eyes widening with my own. “What’s wrong, Laura?”

I shake my head, my lips rolling in. I don’t even want to say it.

“Laura?” Milo takes a step closer. His face is drawn tight. Oh God, I

cannot let Milo know, especially right now. He's going to blame himself.

I plaster a smile on my face. "Nothing, nothing. Just freaked myself out." Milo doesn't look convinced, as his eyes dart over to Ollie across the room.

"We'll have to figure out what changed, but it seems like you're moving around okay." Ares examines me. If anyone knows I'm lying, it's the Dark Lord I look down at the sheet, pretending to fold it around me tighter.

"Okay, yeah. I feel fine. Probably just tired after the connection." I try to make my voice light and airy, but it comes off more breathless.

"Dante, will you take a look around since we've been up here for a while?" Ares settles his hand on my shoulder, his thumb lightly stroking behind my ear. Every nerve ending in my body is centered on his hand.

"Got it." Dante is out the door quickly, taking the job seriously.

Once I hear him clomp down the stairs, Ares addresses the rest of us. "Why don't you guys get some sleep? It's pretty late."

Reluctantly, I begin to move so I can climb back in the bed, but Ares's grip on my shoulder tightens. I look up, questioning him with my eyes, but then I see it. He didn't buy my story for a second. He does a minuscule nod toward the door.

"I have to go to the bathroom?" It comes out like a question.

"I'll take you," Ares responds before I'm even done speaking. "Grab something to sleep in."

I make my way over to the bed and snag Milo's abandoned t-shirt. He smiles at me when I bend down, already having climbed back in bed. I don't have to fake the grin I send back in his direction.

Ares is on my heels as I push into the bathroom door. He snaps it closed behind us and crowds in close to me—the bathroom is small, but not this small.

I can't meet his stare. "Did you need something?" I play dumb.

His fingertip lands under my chin and lifts. "I need to know what's really wrong. I can't fix it, *Cara*, if you don't tell me what it is."

I wish it were that easy. I make a scoffing sound and look away. Now that I've had a second to think about it, it's really not that bad. So what if I can't feel anything else besides their touch? Feeling everything *but* their touch would be so much worse. But Milo. Milo will blame himself.

"Please?" Ares whispers.

Swallowing, I take a steadying breath. His plea for the truth is enough to convince me to tell him. "I think Milo was right, something about me has

changed.”

“What is it?” Ares actually sounds hesitant.

I look at him now, studying his dark eyes. “You have to promise not to tell him, not yet. He’s always so afraid he’s going to hurt someone.” I flick the tear that dared to fall from my treacherous eye off my cheek. I wouldn’t have even known it was there if my vision weren’t so blurry.

“Just tell me,” Ares orders, avoiding my promise.

I shake my head in denial. It would hurt me not to tell him, but I won’t, not if he won’t promise. It would kill him to lie to me, so I know he won’t tell if he promises not to.

“I promise,” he grits through his teeth. He’s angry I made him promise.

My eyes are blurry again. I don’t want him to be mad at me. I sniff a few times in case my nose is running. “I can’t feel—”

“What?” He doesn’t let me finish.

“Anything, but you guys,” I continue.

“What?” Ares repeats.

Slowly, this time I tell him, “I can’t feel anything but you, my Infinity.”

“I don’t understand.” He shakes his head like what I’m telling him is unbelievable. I’m right there too. It is crazy.

I lift my hands from the sheet, and it slides off my shoulders and pools behind me. I rub my thumb over my fingers right in front of my eyes. Nothing. It’s like my brain isn’t sending the right signals.

“I can’t feel this.” Frustrated, I reach out and slap my palm against the wall, hoping to feel the sting on my hand, but again, nothing happens.

Ares grabs my wrist when I go to do it again. My nerve endings come alive. I close my eyes, taking in every facet of his touch. I can feel the flex of his fingers as his hand tightens, the heat from his palm gathering over the back of my arm. Opening my blurry eyes, I whisper, “I can feel you.”

Ares grabs the back of my neck and drags my head to his chest. His other hand goes to the small of my back. “Don’t tell him, Ares, please.” My back shakes as I sob against his chest.

Ares clears his throat. “We won’t be able to keep it from him forever, sweetheart. He’ll have to know eventually.” The words rumble up his chest.

“Not yet, not yet,” I repeat over and over. This is going to kill Milo.

CHAPTER 4

“*Y*ou’re clumsy today. Looks like you need a few more hours of sleep,” Ollie teases.

I pretend to hold my toe and give him a little grimace. It’s hard to be aware of your body when you aren’t aware of your body. I thought I was doing a pretty good job until I slammed my hand in the door. At least I realized why I can’t feel anything. It’s like my skin has changed. I didn’t even have a mark on my hand after, and I’m sure it should have left some damage behind.

“It would be hard to sleep through all of this anyway.” I wave my hand around, encompassing the four men moving around the house installing motion sensors and camera equipment.

“True,” he admits. Closing the distance between us, he wraps his arms around me, settling his hands over the small of my back. “Do you need me to kiss it better?”

Lightness fills my soul. Ollie can always bring me joy. I furrow my brow and give him a stern face. “I got something you can kiss.”

Taking the bait, he leans down so his face is right in mine. “Anytime, anyplace,” he whispers.

I shove his shoulder and laugh. “I was talking about my butt.”

Pulling back, he opens his mouth in mock outrage, then winks at me while biting his lip. “Me, too!” He runs off cackling before I can muster a response.

I wave my fist and yell, “You say that now, but what about in twenty years when my butt is fat and saggy?”

His head pokes out from behind the doorframe. “I’m down for it.” He

disappears again. I just shake my head, the smile still on my lips.

Milo comes into the kitchen. He walks right over to me and places a kiss on the top of my head. I savor his touch. Would he do this if he knew?

“Are you hungry?” I feel guilty that I’m keeping it from him, but I would feel worse if he blamed himself.

“Nah, just bored.”

“What’s the matter? Ollie doesn’t have any more hard labor for you?” I tease him.

“It seems like the renovations are going to be put on hold. No use tearing everything up if it might be a while before we can get anyone in here to fix it.”

I pull away from him. “Why are they on hold?”

“Well, we can’t have strangers coming in and out of the house right now, not with Leon. That would be foolish.”

I look out the window, seeing the trees swaying in the slight breeze. “I guess I hadn’t thought about that.”

Milo settles his palm on my shoulder. “It’s okay. We have plenty of time, and this place really isn’t that bad.” He pauses, looking up at the ceiling. “I just thought of something I can do.”

“Oh, yeah? What is that?”

“I can build some walls in the basement, install a proper door.” The light ring around his dark-blue eyes shimmers with excitement. He drops a kiss to my lips. As soon as he steps away, he shouts, “Ares, I need the SUV. I want to go get some supplies.”

I tuck my arms over my stomach and look out the window. That will keep him busy for a while, but now I need something to do. Heavy footsteps alert me to someone coming into the kitchen. I know it’s not one of the guys. I turn around to make sure I’m not in the way.

“Hey, Laura, right?” The man stops several feet away from me.

“Hi, yes. Did you need something?” He’s fairly tall, with sandy brown hair and light blue eyes. If I had to guess, I’d say he’s Ares’s age.

“Nah, just thought I’d introduce myself. I’m Elliot.” He takes a few steps closer but maintains a healthy distance before extending his hand for me to shake.

“Oh, sorry.” I reach forward and clasp his hand. I don’t clutch his palm too hard, afraid I might squeeze too much. I loosen my grip quickly. I still haven’t gotten used to seeing myself touch something and not feel it.

Elliot's head tilts to the side as I wiggle my fingers and silence falls over us. "So, do you have a Synergist?" I ask, the question popping out of my mouth, when the awkwardness gets to be too much.

A genuine smile lifts his lips, and he nods, pointing over his shoulder. "Manny and I are bound to Marissa."

"Oh, is she here?" I peer past his shoulder into the living room.

"No, just Manny. He's working upstairs right now."

I nod, feeling a little foolish since I knew there weren't any other women here. "Can I get you a drink or anything?" I grab the handle of the old fridge.

"Sure. I'll take a soda or a water; whatever you have is fine."

I open the door and look inside. Thanks to Ollie's frequent trips to the store, we have a variety of drinks and take-out containers stacked up. I stand back and let him see the contents. "Take your pick."

"Cola's fine, thanks."

I grab a can of soda and hand it over to him, thinking I should probably ask the others if they want anything too.

He looks down at the can without opening it and continues to stand there. I shuffle my feet. It seems as if there's something he wants, or at the very least something he wants to say. Otherwise, he would have left by now.

He meets my eyes. "So, I've worked for Ares for years, known him longer," he begins, and I smooth my shirt down and swallow. "He's different," Elliot tells me.

I'm not sure what he expects me to say. Sorry? I'm not. I fold my arms under my chest and wait.

"He's been struggling for the last few years." Elliot looks down at the ground, like he's betraying Ares by saying the words out loud. "I've hated watching him pretend that everything was okay—that he was okay—while the rest of us got paired up." He switches the can to his other hand.

I stand a little straighter when his light blue eyes land on me again. "I guess I just wanted to thank you."

My eyes widen, that isn't what I thought he was going to say. "Um..." I can't even form words right now.

"Seeing him happy, seeing him even now with this Leon stuff going on," Elliot nods his head, "I'm just happy for him. Happy that he finally got what he deserves." He shuffles his feet now with a slight blush staining his cheeks.

"I'm happy he's happy, too," I tell Elliot just above a whisper. This is so awkward, but I know it's coming from a good place.

Elliot clears his throat. “Well, thanks for the soda, Laura.” He turns and is out of the kitchen in a rush.

A small giggle escapes me. “Don’t laugh at him, *Cara*, that was painful for both of us,” Ares groans. I look over my shoulder and see Ares leaning against the wall, with one ankle crossed over the other.

There’s no way Elliot knew he was there. Placing my hands on my hips, I admonish him, “You shouldn’t be eavesdropping.”

Ares smiles smugly, completely unrepentant. Pushing off the wall, he comes over to me, his hand going behind my neck. His grin fades as he searches my eyes. “How are you feeling?”

I lay my hand over his chest. “The same.” I make my words light. It’s not something I want to dwell on, especially when there’s nothing I can do about it.

“I think we should talk to Milo.” He places his finger over my lips when I start to argue. “Let me finish. I think you could learn to control it, and we need his help.”

I pull back a few inches. “You think I could control it?”

Ares’s eyes widen a fraction. “I’m not positive, but all our abilities, even mine, can be dulled or turned off.” Ares runs his fingers down my hair, which is lying over my chest. “That’s why Milo played football. So he could learn control, among other things.”

A kernel of hope blossoms in my chest, but it dies when I think about having to tell Milo. “I don’t want to tell him yet.”

“Tell who, what?” Dante sets a box on the kitchen counter, and I jump at his voice. The sneaky bugger.

“I’m going to get you a damn bell,” I threaten, leaning around Ares to see him.

Dante chuckles in response. He leans his butt against the counter and glances between Ares and me, his brow furrowing. “What are you not telling us?”

Ares blows out a breath and tilts his head, telling me it’s my job to decide whether I tell him or not. He won’t outright lie to his brother, or any of them, for that matter.

I bite the inside of my lip, debating. After a few long seconds, I beckon Dante over with a crook of my finger. He steps immediately closer, huddling in beside us.

“You have to promise not to tell anyone until I’m ready.” I raise my

brows, examining him. Dante looks at Ares, then back at me, before he swallows then nods.

“Since last night, after I bonded with Milo...” I pause and lower my voice even more. “I can’t feel anything besides you guys.”

Dante’s brow tightens his face closing off. “Explain,” he demands.

It raises my hackles, and a rumble flows up my chest. Dante tips his chin up, exposing his throat to me. “I mean, tell me what you mean, please,” he corrects.

Satisfied with his response, I brush my hand over his chest. The tips of my fingers are more sensitive than ever, tingling with the touch. “Like this, I can’t feel anything that touches me, or that I touch, unless it’s one of you.” Dante’s mouth drops open. “I slammed my hand in the door, and I didn’t feel anything, there wasn’t even a mark.”

Ares grabs my free hand. “You did what?” he asks incredulously.

“Not on purpose.” I roll my eyes. “It’s weird, I can’t feel what’s under my feet or in my hands. I feel clumsy.” I look down at my fingers and flex them.

Ares’s eyes go over the top of my head as his eyes grow unfocused.

“You don’t want Milo to know.” Dante pieces together the reason I’m not telling them.

“It’s just, I know he’s going to blame himself, and it’s not his fault. It’s not even like it’s something bad, it’s just an adjustment,” I explain.

Dante puffs out his cheeks and blows out a breath. “Ares thinks I might be able to learn to control it,” I add hopefully.

“Let’s hope so,” Dante mutters.



WE’RE all gathered around three pizza boxes on the middle of the living room floor. I’ve already had two slices, and I’m contemplating a third, when Milo inquires, “What are we doing as far as school for us and work for you tomorrow, Ares?” He wipes a paper napkin over his lips, looking around.

Ares’s eyes lift from his plate. “I think it would be best if you guys take off another couple of days.” I glance around our rough circle. “Now that Amanda is back, there shouldn’t be any problem having her call in, or sign an excuse for school. We can just say you all have mono or strep throat or something. We can go to the school and pick up all your assignments.”

“We can just get them online.” Ollie dangles a piece of pepperoni over his mouth before letting it fall in.

“Whatever works,” Ares agrees.

“What about you?” I question Ares.

“I can work from home. That’s never been an issue. I can reschedule most, if not all, of my meetings, so that’s not going to be a problem.”

“How long can we keep this up? I mean, we’re only a few months into the school year, we have important tests and stuff coming up.” I glance between them.

“Indefinitely if we need to.” Dante reaches for another slice of pizza. “Your mom being back makes things a whole hell of a lot easier. We can finish the year online if we have to.” He seems almost blasé about it. Something inside of me wants to refuse his easy acceptance. All my life I’ve been fighting to not quit school, because it feels too much as if I’m giving up. But now I might need to, simply for safety.

Ollie drops his back to the floor and lets out a sigh. “Let’s do that. Even after we find that fucker Leon and kick his ass. I’m so over school.”

Milo looks over at Ollie then gives a single shoulder shrug. “I’m down, it’s not like we need more than a diploma anyway.”

I swallow thickly. “What about college, jobs, our futures?”

“That was never in the plan for me,” Ollie pipes up.

“Me either, we always talked about working with Ares once we graduated,” Milo explains.

“It feels like quitting school would be letting him win. Why should we let Leon decide if we can finish school? What if I want to graduate or go to prom?” My face grows warm at the thought. I never thought I could do something as simple as going to prom with my boyfriend—okay, so *boyfriends* now, but still.

I look at Dante since he hasn’t responded yet. “We would still graduate, Laura, and we can even go to prom. Were you planning on college?” he questions.

I bite the inside of my lip. “I mean, I never really explored it as a possibility.” I look down. “I always thought I would still be taking care of my mom.” I close my eyes. Now that she’s back, I will still need to take care of her. I can’t let her return to living in the camper, especially not alone.

“What was that look?” Milo lays his hand on my knee.

“I just now realized I have to figure out something for my mom. She’s not

going to be able to take care of herself.”

“Like hell she can’t,” Ares growls hard. “You’ve been taking care of her for years, Laura. Once this shit is over and she doesn’t need to worry about Leon, you’d better believe she’s going to be taking care of herself.”

I get immediately defensive. “How is she supposed to do that?” My voice is louder than necessary as I unfold my legs from sitting cross-legged.

“She can get a fucking job. I’m not saying we won’t help her, but she’s going to have to help herself, too.”

I look away from Ares. I don’t think he understands how stunted she is, how hard it is for her just to go to the grocery store. Get a job. Yeah, right. “I can’t live here,” I wave my hand around the expansive living room, “while all she has is a motorhome. It’s not right.”

“Laura, my parents have already agreed to let her stay with them, she doesn’t need to go back to the RV.” I dart my eyes over to Dante. His voice is calm, reassuring. “But Ares is right, she needs to take care of herself—and not as a punishment.” Dante glares at his brother, whose lips are in a tight line. There is definitely no love lost between Ares and my mom. “That’s not the way I meant it,” Ares grumbles.

“But she needs to do it for herself, too. She’s been relying on you for too long. If yesterday was any indication, I’m sure she already knows it too,” Dante continues, ignoring Ares’s rebuttal.

I wring my hands in my lap. His words sound okay, but the idea still feels wrong. As if I’m abandoning her. “She’s been through a lot, and she tried her best.” I peer up at Ares. He hasn’t been openly hostile, but I can see and feel the tension in him whenever she is brought up in conversation or is around us.

Ares’s mouth moves as if he’s licking his top teeth. “Yes, you’re right. She’s been through more than anyone should. Losing one of your Infinity...” He shakes his head, not voicing the words. “But she had you to take care of. She should have done better for you.”

Ares pushes his palm against the floor and stands before rushing from the room and into the kitchen. I look around the group, but all of them seem to be avoiding my gaze. It’s clear Ares isn’t the only one who finds her lacking. I blow out a sigh. I can’t even blame them for being mad. I’d be mad, too, if someone had neglected them, but she didn’t do it on purpose. I really do think she tried her best.

CHAPTER 5

Using my palm, I wipe the fog and condensation off the bathroom mirror. I have a towel wrapped around my head and another around my body. The shower here isn't as nice as Ares's, but it's still great compared to what I was used to. I just wish I could feel it.

It's already past ten in the morning, and Ares spoke to Rosa last night. He asked her to talk to my mom about calling in to the school for my absence. So, I slept in.

There's a light tapping on the door, and I call out, "Yeah?"

The knob turns and Dante peeks his head around the door. "Hey." His eyes travel over my body. "Are you hungry?" His voice dips low.

"A little." I lick my lips, watching the way his eyes are glued to the edge of the towel on my thigh.

I take a step in his direction with my right leg, making sure even more of my thigh is exposed through the slit of the towel. Dante doesn't move a muscle other than to lift his eyes as I approach.

I lay my hand over his chest. His t-shirt is black, like usual, and fitted closely to his body. Dante lowers his head so his forehead lands on mine. I love how he shows me affection this way. When he lifts his head, I push myself into his space, my nose nuzzling against the soft fabric as I drag my face up to his neck.

Dante tips his head back, a rumbling sigh leaving his exposed throat. I walk my hands up his chest and around the back of his neck and drag him down so I can bury my face under his jaw.

His arm jerks out and slams into the wall. A thrill skates down my spine. Knowing that I have the power here, that Dante won't even touch me until I

tell him to, makes me feel bold. Keeping one arm around his neck, I pull back and study the tight line of his jaw, the way his nostrils keep flaring with every breath so he can take in as much of my scent as possible.

I drag in a lungful of air, tasting his arousal on my tongue as I do. My animal purrs with satisfaction, this is my mate.

Sliding my hand down Dante's body, I reach the waistband of his jeans. Rotating my palm, I push my fingers under the barrier, and the tips of my fingers explore his flesh until I feel the brush of short hair on my fingertips. Dante sucks in a sharp breath, his flat stomach concaving even further to give me more room to maneuver.

I place a ghost of a kiss on the underside of his jaw. "Morning, Dante," I rasp.

I feel his Adam's apple bob when he swallows. "Morning," he replies in a low hum. Releasing his neck and pulling my hand from his pants, I settle my fingers on the buttons over his fly. Each pop is slow as I peel them open. Dante's head is bent low, watching my every move as I undress him.

"Take your shirt off," I order when I release the last button. As quickly as possible, the shirt is shucked off and on the bathroom floor.

My core grows wet seeing him standing before me, with his pants hanging open so I can see the root of his cock, already hard and thick, pushing against the denim barrier. I take in the bunched muscles along his stomach, leading up to his wide chest and shoulders, and his neck that makes me want to mark him.

My gums ache, thinking about sinking my teeth into the sweet spot where his shoulder and neck meet.

Another wave of his scent hits me even stronger than before. I squeeze my thighs and the ache between my legs throbs once in response. I want nothing more than to lay him down and climb on top of him. I search the small bathroom for a place to do just that.

Dante's back hits the door with a thud. When I look back up at him, his expression is pained. I step closer on instinct. "What's wrong?"

Dante licks his lips. "Please, touch me." His eyes are a little wild, the orangish tint telling me it's more than just Dante in the room with me.

I reach for his sides and lay my hands on his hips, just above his pants. Sliding my hands back, I push under his jeans and stroke over his firm butt, making his pants fall down in the process.

Dante lets out a shaky breath, his pants pooled at his feet. "Step out," I

whisper. He complies, his knees coming up high to kick the material from his legs.

My mouth goes dry as I take him in, every inch of him is perfect. I reach for the towel wrapped around my hair and tug it free, and my long hair falls in chunks around my shoulders. Next, I reach for the towel secured around my body. Dante pants out a few choppy breaths, his hands fisted at his sides.

Turning around so my back is to him, I release the towel, and it drops heavily to the ground. I peer over my shoulder at him and watch as his eyes roam all over my body. Taking a few steps back, I lean into him, bringing my spine flush with his chest.

“Fuck,” he curses. Reaching down, I grab his hands and place them on my hips, our fingers laced together as I drag them up my body until his hands are cupping my breasts. I feel his erection pushed up against the small of my back, if only I were a few inches taller.

Dante drops his nose to the back of my ear as his fingers begin massaging me. I arch into his touch, loving the way his hands feel brushing against my nipples.

Untangling our fingers, I reach back and wrap my arms around his neck, holding his head in place. I swivel my hips, looking for relief as my body craves him.

Dante’s hand leaves my breast and traces down the center of my body in a featherlight caress, but he pulls back before reaching my center and cups the flare of my hip, tugging me back as he grinds his hips upward.

I go up on my tiptoes and a shudder racks my body as our position shifts slightly. Reaching behind me, I grab hold of his cock and push my hips forward. Stroking him up and down a few times, I push his erection lower and fuse our bodies together. A long groan leaves my parted lips as I feel him under my bottom.

I push back, and he slides between my legs, across my lower lips. I grind back harder. When I look down, I can see the very tip of him coming out from between my legs. Dante’s hand is still on my hips and his other hand teases my breast. I rock my hips forward, and he disappears, only to reappear as I push back. I tip my head to rest on his chest and close my eyes as both of our heavy breaths fill the room with warmth.

Damn, this feels good, but I need more. I need to feel him under me, behind me, as I bend over and he fills me. My thoughts only spur me to move harder, faster. Dante lets out a sound of pure lust, a moan of satisfaction as he

rolls my nipple between his fingers.

I bend forward and my lips split around his erection. I reach between my legs and hold him there while I circle my hips, until I have his velvety soft tip right at my clit, then I start rocking again.

“Don’t come, Dante,” I order, seeking my own release. Even with as far gone as I am with love and lust, I know better than to let him come this close to me without a condom. I’m not ready for little Dante cubs.

Dante pinches my nipple hard, but it only brings me closer to my climax. I stroke the underside of Dante’s shaft, reaching for his balls as I make sure his tip stays right where I need with my palm. He pants, his breaths short and hollow, as my movements grow erratic.

The first wave of my orgasm crashes over me. My inner muscles clenching and releasing so hard I cry out his name. My hips slow to a languid dance of movement until I eventually release him from being trapped between my body and hand. As he slides free, Dante shudders, still rock-hard.

“Not yet, baby.” I turn to face him, my legs weak but steady as I take him in my hand. My sole purpose is to make him come. I want to see his eyes staring into mine while I have him in my hand, my mouth.

I lower to my knees, my eyes locked on his. I can smell my scent on him, and any other time it might be weird, but the animal part of me loves that her mate is marked with our scent. I watch Dante’s eyes widen in surprise as I slide my lips over him. There’s no question, not an ounce of doubt he will love every second of what I’m going to do. Freeing that animal in me with him releases any inhibitions I might have, until only instinct and need drive me.

Dante knocks his head into the door twice, his eyes open but unseeing. I don’t take him very deep, just his tip, but I work my hand over him at the same time, the wetness from my mouth making the movement slick as I do.

Dante’s jaw hardens; I can see the tendons in his neck as he grits his teeth. I circle my tongue over his tip and pop him free. “You can come, Dante.”

His hips jerk as he comes on my neck and breasts. A surprised gasp falls from my lips, I was not expecting it to happen so fast.

He groans. “S-Sorry,” he stutters, bending down while he’s still coming to wipe himself off my chest.

I push his hand off my chest with my free hand and stroke him through

his orgasm. “Stop,” I whisper.

I reach behind me to grab the washcloth I left hanging over the tub after my shower. When I see all the tension in his body relax, I bring the cloth up and fold it around Dante’s length. His eyes jerk wide, but a grin forms on his lips. I didn’t even think about how cold it would be. He snatches the cloth and folds it in half, making sure the side that cleaned him up is on the inside.

I rise to my feet, and Dante sets the cold cloth against my skin, cleaning off the mess he left behind. His eyes watch his hand in fascination as the cloth brushes over my neck and chest. “I’m sorry about that. I should have given you more warning.”

I stop his hand from washing me. “It’s okay, Dante. Don’t say sorry for that. It makes me feel good that I can do that to you, make you lose control.”

Dante licks over his lips and leans his face closer to mine. I know what he wants, but I hold off, making him wait. I brush my nose along his for a few long seconds. Then I place my lips against his. We kiss slowly, sweetly for several minutes, enough that I’m near panting again when I pull back. Dante’s eyes are slow to open, and he licks and bites his lips like he’s trying to keep the taste of me in his mouth.

“Didn’t you come up here to offer me food?” I remark, before we end up on the bathroom floor.

“I did. Hungry now?” His voice lingers over the words, making them sound seductive.

I smile. “Starving.”



“WHERE ARE ARES AND MILO?” I hop up on the counter.

Ollie is holding a cold slice of pizza in one hand and a coke in the other. “Ares is in his bedroom working on his computer last I knew.” He shoves a large bite of pizza in his mouth. Around the bite, he adds, “Milo is working in the basement.”

Dante opens the fridge door, and then he bends down and leans forward, digging through all our take-out containers. “I would smack somebody for some eggs over medium and toast right now—and bacon. Yum, bacon,” I mutter, watching him.

“We have pizza or leftover Chinese.” Dante lifts his hands, weighing the

options.

Neither of those sounds good to me right now. “When can we go grocery shopping?”

“Ares will probably want to come,” Ollie interjects before he settles his feet on the ground, letting the lawn chair he was tipping back in hit the tile with a cracking sound.

I wince, I don’t want to drag him away from working again. “Maybe we can go tonight?” I add, sounding hopeful.

“It sounded like Ares was setting something up for tonight. Maybe a meeting with the ‘rents.” Ollie gives a lazy shrug. “We can just go now.”

“Ares is working, it can wait.” I hop down off the counter and peer into the carton of Chinese. It’s Mongolian Beef, and having only recently tried it, I love it, but it’s just not what I want right now.

I scrunch up my nose and shake my head at Dante’s offering. I move over to the fridge to see what I can find on my own. I gaze at the sea of white boxes in all different shapes and sizes, lifting a few to see what’s inside.

“You’re awake.” Ares plants a kiss on my temple. I didn’t even hear him come into the kitchen. He examines the fridge contents with the same disinterest I am.

“Ollie said we have plans tonight?” I stand back and let my butt hit the counter.

“We do. We need to get your mother talking, and I need to know where Leon is. I’m hoping she’ll let me look through her memories. I don’t want to force her.” Ares drags a container out of the fridge and flips open the lid. His lip lifts in a sneer before he sets it back on the shelf.

“I don’t want you to force her either.” I wrap my arms over my chest and watch him close the fridge.

“Hopefully, I won’t need to.” He looks over his shoulder at me, not hiding the fact that he will do whatever he thinks necessary to ensure the outcome he wants.

“I’ll talk to her,” I promise.

“Good,” is his only response.

A loud noise kicks to life downstairs. Ollie rolls his head back on his shoulders. “Great, now he knows you’re awake. Here come the power tools.”

“Better get used to it.” Dante lays a hand on Ollie shoulder. “The renovations are just getting started.” Another groan of disapproval from Ollie.

“We want to go to the grocery store,” he announces to Ares. “Laura said she was going to start smacking people if she didn’t get eggs and bacon.”

“I did not,” I admonish. “I said I *would* smack someone for some eggs and bacon,” I amend, realizing it doesn’t sound any better.

“Let’s keep the maiming to a minimum, shall we?” Ares drawls like he’s talking to wayward children. “Should we make a list?”

“Are you sure you’re not too busy? I don’t want to keep pulling you away from work.” I reach for a bag of beef jerky one of the guys picked up from the gas station the other day.

“Nothing pressing.” Ares grasps the bag after I take out a small chunk, and he brings it up to his nose and takes a whiff. “Are you sure this is still good?”

I roll my eyes. Beef jerky is its own food group. “It’s fine,” I assure him.

“It says refrigerate after opening.” He examines the words on the bag.

“Ares, it’s fine. I used to eat it all the time. I never put mine in the fridge.” I gnaw off a bit of my piece, and he watches me chew before taking out a small piece of his own.

“I’m trusting you,” Ares warns me before taking a small bite.

“We’ll need to go to Walmart or Target, someplace we can pick up a few cooking essentials.” I look around the empty kitchen, noticing we don’t even have a pan to cook eggs in, let alone a toaster. “We’re going to need a list,” I confirm, tearing off another piece of meat.

CHAPTER 6

Milo grabs the back of my seat and pulls himself forward. “I could use a few more things from the hardware store.”

“So, apparently this is a full day of shopping,” Ares complains, and groans his disapproval.

“I can always run out and grab it later, I just thought since we were already out we might as well,” Milo reasons.

“No, it’s fine.” Ares flips on the blinker to make a right turn. I reach over and lay my hand on his thigh. I’m relieved he agreed so easily. I’d rather we all stay together. “We’ll go there first, that way you won’t need to rush because we have groceries waiting in the car.”

We pull into the parking lot of a big box hardware store, and Ares glides the Suburban into a spot near the front. It’s nearly lunchtime on a Monday, and we have our pick of places to park. Dante and Milo open the rear doors, and Ollie climbs out of the last row of seats after the others.

“Do we need a cart or one of those?” Ollie points to a big, orange, flatbed cart.

“A regular cart should be fine, the wood and dry wall were all delivered on Saturday. I need a level and tape measuring tape Maybe another drill in case anyone decides to help me.” Milo tugs a cart free from the corral.

“That’s all you need?” Dante sounds doubtful.

“I mean, I can get some other stuff, too, but this is what I need for today. Once the rough work is done, I’ll need drywall tape and mud, and some tools for that.” Milo widens his hands. “I don’t know how long before I’ll be ready to use it though.”

“We might as well just get that stuff, too; that way we don’t need to make

another run up here tomorrow. I have a meeting I'll have to be home for," Ares informs us, as he steps through the doors of the store.

"Is someone coming to the house?" I look over to the right and see huge Christmas trees lined up along with massive yard inflatables decorating the main aisle. I'm immediately drawn to a fat tree, it has realistic pinecones and fluffy white snow on the branches, making it look like something out of a fairy tale. I brush my palm over the needles, wishing I could tell if they're as soft as they look.

We never had a Christmas tree. I would decorate the camper with the things I made at school. One year, we were even given a small pine tree sapling in a Styrofoam cup to plant. I put it in the ground, but we moved before I ever saw it get any bigger. I wonder if it's still there? I don't even remember what town that was in.

"That's a nice one, but I like the real ones better." Dante shakes one of the branches and small pieces of the fake snow fall to the ground.

"Does it ever snow here?" Mom usually tried to have us in a warmer climate in the winter, since the motorhome isn't insulated very well and hard to keep warm. Plus, I always had to walk to school.

"In the mountains it does." Ollie wraps his arm over my shoulders and gazes up at the tree. "We should go skiing." He releases me and turns to Milo. "Remember that one time when you swerved off into the woods because you almost ran over that little kid?" Ollie doesn't bother to hide his chuckle.

"Yes, I remember." Milo starts to walk away from the Christmas display. I follow along behind him. "I had scrapes all over my hands and face from the stupid tree branches."

I look back over my shoulder, watching the tree as we head deeper into the store. Ares catches me staring.

Milo gathers up supplies, filling the basket so much I wonder if we shouldn't have gotten the flatbed after all. "Are we going to be able to fit the groceries in the back?" I watch the cashier ring up the items as Milo dutifully places them back in the shopping cart.

"We can always load the groceries in the back seat. Ollie can sit in the middle," Dante suggests, tangling his fingers with mine while we wait.

It doesn't take long to stack all the stuff in the back of the vehicle, leaving a surprising amount of room for the other stuff we need.

We pile back into the SUV with me still in the front seat and the guys in

the back as Ares drives. “Where to next?” he asks, after putting on his seatbelt.

“Someplace we can get a few pots and pans, maybe a little microwave and groceries,” I tell him, excited at the idea of getting our own things.

Ares looks in the rearview mirror. “Does anyone else need anything while we’re out?”

“Nah, we’re good,” Ollie answers for all of them.

The drive to the next store is pretty quick, and it’s much busier than the hardware store. Ares finds a spot near the rear of the lot to park.

“I have the list.” I fumble with my pocket, my fingers clumsy as I pull the scrap of paper from my back pocket.

“Normally I’d say divide and conquer, but let’s stay together. It shouldn’t take us too long,” Ares instructs as he exits the car.

Dante and Milo end up on either side of me as we make our way to the doors. Ares grabs a basket. “We might need two.” He jerks his chin at Ollie who happily tugs another cart free.

“Have you ever grocery shopped before?” I ask Ollie, when he makes his way over to the fresh produce section right at the front of the store.

“No, not really. I mean, I’ve picked up a few things here and there.” He grabs a huge grapefruit and tosses it in the air. I reach to snag it before he can, but I miss. Ollie gives me a funny look and places it back with the others. I slowly wrap my numb fingers over the end of his basket and steer it to the center of the store.

“We need to get the pots and pans first. Cold stuff—for the fridge and freezer—we’ll get last,” I direct, planning our strategy.

“Aye, aye captain.” He mocks salutes me as I drag the cart away from the produce section.



It’s late afternoon by the time we get out of the store, it took way longer than any of us expected. Each of us had different ideas of what to get, and how much—not to mention all the times one of us got distracted by something that we *didn’t* need.

As soon as we get close to the car, I get a bad feeling. I lift my arm to stop the guys. “Dante,” I whisper urgently. He immediately goes on alert. He

tips his head back, and his chest expands as he drags in a lungful of air.

“I feel it,” he confirms.

“What is it?” Milo asks, looking around the parking lot for a threat.

“I don’t know yet, but it has that same wrongness as the box at the camper did.” I take a step closer to the SUV, but Ares grabs my arm to stop me, his eyes locked on the Suburban. I place my hand over his. “I’m not going to touch anything. I’m just going to see if I can figure out what it is,” I tell him.

He releases me reluctantly. Dante matches my steps, moving right next to me. As we move, the eerie feeling grows stronger. I look over my shoulder, convinced someone is right there ready to strike, but I only see the guys. Milo and Ollie are keeping an eye on the surrounding parking lot, and Ares is bringing his phone up to his ear.

Pushing forward, I make it to the rear of the vehicle. “I think it’s up there.” I point to the front of the car. Dante jerks his chin and steps in front of me. Slowly, we make our way around the SUV. As we pass the front passenger door, the car’s hood becomes visible. Expecting to find another small box, I’m surprised to see a purple flyer tucked under the driver’s side windshield wiper.

I peer up at Dante, confused. “Is that it?”

He shrugs, not taking his eyes off the paper. “Could be.”

Ares approaches from behind. “I have your mother on the phone,” he announces. “Leon can influence objects and imbue them with emotions. If he left something here, he’s trying to influence one, or all of us.”

A weight settles in my stomach. “So that’s how it works? If one of us picked it up—touched it—it could infect us?” I stare at Ares, his eyes are locked on mine.

“I’m going to get rid of it now. We’ll talk more tonight.” He pulls the phone from his ear and mashes his finger on the screen. “From what she said, it’s only temporary. We would need constant exposure for it to continue working.” Ares retreats back to Milo and Ollie in a jog. He grabs one of the bags filled with groceries and dumps its contents into the cart, keeping the bag in his hand.

Ollie and Milo return with him to the front of the car and watch as he shoves his hand in the bag and reaches for the purple flyer. “Wait, are you sure?” I caution him before he grabs the paper.

“Amanda said as long as I didn’t let it touch my skin it would be fine.”

Ares balls his free hand into a fist and goes for the paper again. “I can’t just leave it here, who knows what would happen to the person who found it if it flew off the car while we were driving. Plus, I don’t want it anywhere near any of us.” He carefully lifts up the wiper blade and, using the bag as a glove on his other hand, he snatches up the flyer, crumpling it in the bag and folding the plastic over it while removing his hand.

Ares holds up the bag, examining the simple piece of paper inside. “What did it feel like?”

I scrunch up my nose. “It just felt wrong, like the box. I can’t describe it more than that.” I look over at Dante to see if he has a better assessment.

“Same,” is his only answer.

“You can’t tell what would happen if we touched it? I mean, I’m sure it wouldn’t make us want to paint rainbows, but it would be helpful to know exactly what his intention was.” Ollie’s eyes are narrowed on Ares’s fist.

“Should we test it?” Milo asks hesitantly. “If Amanda said the feeling would be temporary, should one of us touch it to see what it would really do?”

I shake my head vehemently. “I don’t want any of you guys touching it. What if it made you want to hurt each other, or yourself? No, it’s not a good idea.”

“We might not have another option, *Cara*. We could take some precautions first.” Ares looks at the others, his face grim.

“How do you know it would only be temporary for sure? Maybe that box my mom had was what made her so crazy,” I counter, my hands going to my hips. “I mean, it kind of makes sense.” She said she would think about me when she was at work, when she was away from the camper, but she didn’t like me when she was there. “Maybe once you touch it, it only needs to be in your proximity to influence you?” I could totally be grasping for straws, but the explanation does fit. And it would be nice to think my mother’s indifference to me growing up wasn’t all her.

“We’ll talk to her more tonight,” Ares says, not confirming either way if he’s still planning on testing it or not. “Let’s get this stuff loaded up.”

“What are you going to do with that?” I motion to the bag still in his hand. “I don’t think we should take it home.”

Ares examines the bag again. “Any ideas?” He looks at the guys.

“Laura’s right, we shouldn’t take it home,” Dante agrees.

“Fuck, I don’t know what to do with it.” The frustration in Ares’s tone is

clear.

“I’ll run back in the store and get a better bag and some gloves, just in case. We’ll figure out where to stash it until we decide what to do.” Ollie doesn’t give anyone a chance to respond before he jogs back toward the store.

Dante moves to the rear of the SUV with Milo right behind him. They shove the items that Ares dumped out of the bag into other random bags. I grab a few sacks on top, knowing that we have too much crap to fit into the very back, and take it to the rear passenger door to load into the last row of seats.

Ares keeps his distance, staying near the hood of the car. Ollie returns with a small lunch cooler in one hand and a grocery bag in the other. He and Ares place the paper in the lunch box using disposable gloves as we finish loading the groceries.

“Did you figure out what to do with it?” Milo questions, slamming the hatch of the SUV.

“I need to keep it. We need to examine it more.” Ares looks a little strange wearing the latex gloves while holding the small purple lunch box. “I have way too many questions to just throw it away.”

“Other than what it would do, what else do you want to know? How it would affect us?” I ask, curious about what he’s thinking.

“Yeah, like would it affect anyone, or is it designed specifically for us? How long do the effects last? Does increased exposure affect its potency, or does the emotion left behind fade over time?” Ares replies quickly. “This is our best chance to find out what exactly Leon is capable of and how to use it against him,” he finishes. I hadn’t even thought of all those variables.

“What about one of the guys who installed the security system?” Ollie suggests. “It’s not like we have many options right now, unless you want to get the council involved.”

Ares grimaces, but drags his phone out of his pocket. He tears off one glove and lets it hit the ground before poking at the screen. “There’s a climate-controlled storage place about eleven miles away. Elliot and the guys are already back in Columbia.”

Dante tangles his fingers with mine, as Ares studies us. I cling to him, grateful that I feel more like myself when his fingers are around mine. The loss of touch has left me feeling a bit off balance. You don’t realize how often you rely on a sense until it’s gone.

“I know this makes you guys feel uncomfortable,” Ares holds the lunch cooler up a little, “but I can’t leave you here knowing Leon has been here and could still be here watching us. Do you think you could deal with it being in the car long enough for me to get to the storage place?”

I peer up at Dante. “I’m okay. It gives me the heebie-jeebies, but I can deal with it. You?”

“I’d rather tape it to the bumper, but it’s fine,” Dante sneers.



“I’M TOO hungry to wait until later to eat. Can we stop and grab something?” Dante mumbles, as soon as Ares returns to the car after dropping off the lunch box. I can’t imagine what the people he rented the storage unit from thought about him wearing latex gloves and carrying his package.

I slam my hand over my mouth to keep from giggling. All the tension I’ve been feeling this afternoon is looking for an outlet. We just spent hours shopping so we could avoid eating out, but here he is asking to get takeout.

Dante looks over at me, his brow furrowed. I’m squished between him and Ollie in the middle row. I widen my eyes and roll my lips in, any thought of humor evaporating. I will not laugh at him for being hungry, I’ve gone hungry enough to know it’s nothing to joke about. I know Dante’s situation isn’t the same, but it doesn’t matter. I’ve known for a long time his appetite is far larger than normal.

“I’ll run through somewhere for you, but it needs to be on the way home and quick, before this shit melts.” Ares checks his mirrors before backing out of the spot.

“I don’t care, just someplace I can get a couple burgers. I haven’t eaten since this morning.” Dante places his hand over his stomach like it hurts.

I look out the front window, spying a place that says “Butter Burgers” on the sign with a big ice cream cone next to it. “How about there?” I point between Ares and Milo in the front seats.

Ares moves to the left lane so he can make the turn for the restaurant. He glides up to the drive-thru ordering screen.

A greeting, followed by, “What can I get you?” comes from the box almost immediately.

“We need a second,” Ares drawls. “What do you guys want?”

He repeats each of our orders, adding a grilled chicken sandwich for himself. I gawk at the price displayed on the bottom of the screen, it's more than I spent on food in a week. I just shake my head. I'll probably never get used to how easily they spend money.

Ares hands the girl at the window a credit card after she tells him the total. She makes quick work of giving back his card and the receipt. Once the window closes, Milo turns in his seat a bit to look into the back. "After we get everything put away, do you think you could give me a hand for a couple of minutes? I want to get a few things done before we have to go out tonight."

"Sure," Dante replies.

"What are we doing?" Ollie looks sideways at Milo.

"Anything I want. *You make me work all the time.*" Milo settles his back into the seat facing forward again with a little pouty scowl on his face.

The drive-up window slides open and I see bags already lined up on the counter. Ares takes each, thanking the girl while handing them off to Milo. He sorts through the bags, finding a paper wrapped burger, and hands it back to Dante. He doesn't waste any time opening it up. Right before he takes the first bite, he freezes and holds the sandwich out to me instead. I shake my head, warmed by his thoughtfulness.

CHAPTER 7

“We’re in the kitchen,” Rosa calls, when we enter the door to the mudroom. Everyone but Ares kicks off their shoes. I struggle for a minute, trying to line up my toe and heel like I would usually do without even thinking about it, but it takes me several seconds to get my shoes off.

Ollie wraps his arm over my shoulders and tips his head into mine as we move out into the hallway. As much as I’ve missed my mom and been worried about her, I’m nervous. So much in my life has changed over the last few months. How is she going to react when she sees me with the guys? She didn’t say anything last night when we left to go home, but I could see she wanted to.

Milo walks into the kitchen first, with Dante right behind him. Ollie and I make our way through the door together. Rosa is already standing, ready to greet us with hugs, as has become usual for her.

I can’t bring myself to look over at my mom. When I return Rosa’s embrace, I’m a little stiffer than usual, but I wrap my arms around her and briefly squeeze before stepping back. Ollie is right there waiting. He doesn’t give me the chance to deny him the closeness I probably would have out of sheer nerves. Mom stays on her stool, quiet as a mouse.

“Hey, Mom.” I drag Ollie with me to get a little closer to her. Her lips lift, but it’s mostly her going through the motions of smiling. I study her eyes. She seems more distant now than she did before she disappeared. “Everything okay?” I immediately fall into the role of caretaker.

She brings her hand up and squeezes her temples between her thumb and middle finger. “Just a headache, nothing to worry about,” she replies,

dismissing me.

“Do you want an ibuprofen? Have you eaten? It might help,” I ask her, not convinced it’s just a headache.

“I had lunch, and I think we’re all eating together for dinner.” Mom looks around me over to Rosa, who’s chatting easily with Dante.

“Are you okay staying here?” I whisper.

Her eyes jump back to mine. “I’m fine, Laura, better than I have been in a long time. I just wish I weren’t putting everyone else in danger.” She sighs out the last part, her cold exterior cracking a little with the confession.

I pull out the empty stool next to her. “You don’t think he’ll leave us alone?” I ask, sounding a little too hopeful.

“He didn’t stop looking for me for almost eighteen years,” is her answer. Ollie stays on my opposite side, giving us the illusion of privacy.

“Was he mean to you while you were with him?” I stare at my fingers on the island instead of looking at her.

“He could have been worse.” I peek over at her after her response. “He fed me and gave me clothes, but I wasn’t allowed out of his sight.” Her eyes go unfocused.

My mouth goes dry. I really don’t want to think about what he did to her, what else he could have done while she was gone.

“He left something on our car today, while we were shopping,” I tell her, before remembering, “Oh yeah, Ares called. You already know.” I ball my hands up and bring them down to my lap. “But that means he’s watching us; he probably already knows where we live. Ares can’t go to work, and we can’t go to school. We have to do something to make him stop. To make sure he leaves us alone.”

Mom stays quiet.

“Is there anything you can tell us about him? Where he was holding you, how his abilities work, if he actually has more than one?” I twist my neck so I can watch her and her reactions.

“I really don’t know where we were. It was just a house—a nice house—but just a house.” She opens her hands on the island.

“Well, that’s something, right? Was the house nice like this one?” I gaze around at the opulence I’ve actually grown a little used to since staying here. “Or nice like a normal nice?” I think back to the few times we would talk about finding a place to stay; she always wanted a little bungalow.

“Big like this, but older.” She looks around, her eyes passing over the fine

cabinets and granite countertops.

“We stayed mostly on the lower level. It was underground.” She closes her eyes and blinks several times. When she looks at me again, that detached haze is there again.

“Ares is thinking about letting one of us touch the paper he left behind, so we can see what he was trying to do with it.” I want to keep her engaging with me, want her to know we’re fighting against him. “Do you think that’s safe?”

“With Leon, you never can assume.” She shakes her head and licks her lips in a nervous gesture.

“Will you tell me about Wyatt, Mom?”

She flinches when I say his name. I can’t imagine what this must be like for her. Can’t imagine what it would be like if something were to happen to Ollie or Dante and knowing that it was Ares or Milo that hurt them. No wonder she’s so screwed up.

She takes a deep breath, then admits, “He was...he was my everything.” She flattens her lips into a tight, makeshift smile. “We had an instant connection. It was electric. Nothing like what I experienced with Leon.” I shut off all the background noise from all the guys and their families and give my mom my full attention.

Mom opens her mouth to speak but closes it. She swallows and tries again. “I guess I can’t tell you about one without telling you about the other. Leon knew about Wyatt before I did. He kept us apart until Wyatt decided he was tired of waiting for Leon and all his excuses.” One side of her mouth tips up and a genuine smile lights up her face.

“Wyatt, your dad, he didn’t come from a wealthy family like the Whitmores. One of his fathers was an animal shifter, a fox... I think.” Mom’s head tilts to the side. “Shifters, especially small animal shifters, aren’t viewed as particularly powerful, and it can have an effect on how others in the community treat them.”

I dart my eyes in Dante’s direction. He’s lounging on the back of the couch with feet on the floor, and his arm stretched over the back as he grins at something Rosa and Mal are saying. I don’t understand how something as special as being a shifter could be looked at as less than any of the other abilities. The thought of someone treating Dante any different, because he can shift into a tiger, makes me instantly angry.

Mom continues, probably not even realizing the effect her words are

having on me. “I didn’t know that Wyatt had reached out to Leon to tell him that he, too, bore our mark. Leon never told me.”

“That’s not surprising after learning how screwed up he is,” I snarl. The weight of Ollie’s hand lands over mine in my lap. He gives my fingers a gentle squeeze, reminding me he’s here with me.

“No, I don’t suppose it is. But I was naïve back then. I knew something was wrong with our connection. I just didn’t know what it was, and I was too embarrassed to talk to anyone about it. I grew up dreaming about finding my Infinity. Knowing that one day, I would have what my parents had, my friends had.”

My mom looks over in Rosa’s direction. She’s leaning forward, her hand outstretched to William. It’s plain to everyone in the room how happy she is. Even with the cloud of Leon hanging over us, her eyes are bright with happiness. As we watch, William pulls her up to stand and wraps his arms around her back. Then, as she tips her face up, he dips down, and they share a stolen moment of tenderness, a sweet kiss. Even as they each pull away, still staring into each other’s eyes, you can see the love and devotion shining between them.

Mom looks away. She reaches for a napkin and drags it across the counter, wiping away imaginary crumbs. “Anyway, Leon thought he could intimidate Wyatt with his money and his family’s power, but it didn’t work. Wyatt used his mimic ability to sneak into the house to see me, because Leon and I barely left the house at that point.” Mom tears a little piece of the napkin off, her fingers working quickly on another.

“How did he get in? How did his mimic ability work?” Ares interjects, placing a can of soda on the counter in front of me. He leans back against the cabinets behind him and folds his arms across his chest, waiting for my mother to answer his question.

“He had to touch someone to be able to use their ability. It only lasted a short while—maybe twenty minutes—but he was able to sustain it much longer after we bonded,” Mom answers with a note of pride in her tone.

“Once Leon knew there was no way to keep us apart, he got fanatical about testing Wyatt. He wanted to know how long Wyatt could sustain an ability, how many abilities he could mimic a day, and how much stronger Wyatt was when we were together.”

Mom shakes her head in disbelief. “We were just starting to realize how screwed up Leon really was. I think he knew Wyatt and I were planning on

going to my parents and telling them that something was wrong.” The napkin she has been tearing up has been reduced to a small pile of tiny white pieces.

“You see, my parents, they had money and prestige like the Whitmores. And with Wyatt by my side, I wasn’t afraid to tell them I wasn’t connected to Leon, identifier or not.”

“What stopped you from going to them?” I want to place my hand over her fingers to stop her from shredding the tiny shred of the napkin she has left, but I don’t.

“Leon did. The night we planned to leave, he had dinner brought in, made a big deal about us all eating it together.” Mom makes a scoffing sound.

“I should have known right then something was off. But I was too preoccupied with our plans to leave. I didn’t think Leon had a clue about us leaving. To be honest, I didn’t think he would care much. The only thing he seemed to care about at all was Wyatt’s ability, but I thought his obsession was more scientific.”

“How did he get you both to stay?” Ares inquires softly.

“Manipulation. He used his abilities against us.” Mom doesn’t move her head, but she looks up at Ares.

The mask of confusion on his face is clear. “How is that possible?” he finally queries slowly.

“We never bonded. Looking back, he had been using it on me the entire time. I never would have gone months without speaking to my family or Rosa. He was manipulating me from the beginning.”

Ares brings his hand up and covers his mouth. He drags his fingers down and tugs at his chin. “Then how do we know he’s not influencing you now?”

Ollie’s head turns in our direction, all pretenses of him giving us privacy evaporating. Mom’s face goes ashen as she glances between the three of us.

“He’s not...I don’t think he is.” She stands up from the stool and inches away from us.

“How would you know? If you never bonded with him, he could still be using his abilities against you.” Ares watches her retreat, his eyes never leaving her, and he has a cold look of calculation on his face. “Did he give you anything—those clothes, anything that he could have influenced?”

Mom’s hand comes up to her chest, and she grips the material of her shirt. “No, Rosa gave me these, but the clothes from yesterday...” She doesn’t need to add anything more.

Dante slips out the door behind her, unseen by my mom. I’m sure he’s

going to see if he can sense anything from the room where she's staying.

I stand up slowly. "Mom, it's okay, you don't have anything right now that could be affecting you. I would know." I can see the fear in her eyes. No wonder she's so terrified of him. He could make her do anything, and it would be completely out of her control.

"We don't know how long the effects last. We need to be certain," Ares adds. When I look back at him, I notice we've captured everyone's attention.

Dante returns to the kitchen. "I didn't feel anything." He makes his way over to my side.

Mom's narrowed eyes dart over to Dante. "How can you be sure?"

"Dante and I can... feel... when he manipulates something. Just being near it is enough for us to sense it," I tell her.

"How?" Mom folds her arms across her chest, tucking her hands under her arms as if she's cold.

"I don't know how it works. Ares put some equipment in the motorhome so we would know if you or anyone else went there. The cameras were triggered, but there was interference." I look over my shoulder at Ares, making sure I'm explaining this correctly.

He gives me a slight nod to continue. "We went to check it out, but something felt off as soon as I got inside, Dante sensed it too. There was a box, a box like the one you kept your ring in, on the driver's seat."

Mom's face pales, and I notice when she swallows. "He left that for you. I can't believe you can sense his ability." She licks her lips and reaches her hand in my direction. "Can you tell if he's done something to me?"

I go to step forward to accept her hand, but Dante's heavy palm lands on my shoulder. "I think we need a better understanding of how his ability works first. How do we know if you're infected or not? It might spread."

"I think we would still be able to sense it, Dante." He looks down at me, and he's still reluctant, I can see it in the way his eyes are searching mine.

He releases me, and I take a step closer to Mom, closing the distance between us. I reiterate what I just said but grab for her hand anyway. "I didn't feel anything off Mom before; I still don't." This close together, I have to look down to meet her eyes. She's only a couple inches shorter, but it seems more obvious now. The feeling of her hand in mine doesn't even register, I know my fingers are wrapped around hers, but I can't feel it. That sends a pang of loss through my chest.

After a few long seconds, she tugs her hand away and looks down at the

ground. “I want to tell you everything I know. I’m just afraid it’s not very much.”

“Anything might be helpful,” Ares encourages. “If you don’t want to talk about it, I could take a look through your memories?” he offers hopefully.

Mom peers up from the floor, her shoulders go back a little, and she meets Ares’s eyes. “With direct contact he can influence your emotions. It’s not like mind control. More like he can make everything fuzzy, so you just don’t care. Like you’ve been desensitized. Things that you would never do otherwise seem like no big deal.”

“How long does that last?” Ares maneuvers around the kitchen until he’s standing on my other side, letting go of the fact that she ignored his offer to get inside her head.

“It’s hard to say, it only takes a tiny brush of his fingers to...” Mom pauses, looking for words. “Renew the influence,” she finishes, sounding uncertain.

“Does he need skin to skin contact?” Ollie pipes up.

“For that kind of connection, yes. I don’t think his abilities work on everything, or maybe he just favors certain things. I don’t know.” Her eyes go a little glassy.

“He was always making little trinkets, boxes, and carving things out of rock and wood. Those things seem to hold almost as much power as a touch. But something he just picks up, say the remote, or a fork.” She gestures around the room. “His taint doesn’t last long then—hours, maybe. This is all information I gathered years ago, so I have no idea if his ability has changed, or if what he did to Wyatt has changed him.” Mom’s shoulders go up as she lifts her open palms to us.

“So, would the object only hold his influence for hours, or would it only influence the person who touched it for hours?” Milo conjectures, settling himself against the back of the sofa, his hands gripping the edge.

“The object, I think.” Mom grimaces.

“Why don’t you come sit down?” Rosa lifts her hand and waves Mom over to the living room area. Mom hesitates for a moment, but then makes her way around the room and settles herself on the edge of the couch cushion.

Milo switches positions so he’ll be able to see her better, while Dante, Ares, and I walk over to join them.

“What level of control are we talking about?” Ares asks as soon as we’re all seated.

Mom folds her hands in her lap. “Not complete. For instance, he couldn’t have made me jump off a bridge.”

“Did you remember after? If he influenced you, did you realize it once it wore off?” Ares leans his elbows on his knees so he can see around Dante and me to study my mom.

She gazes off to the side, not focusing on anything. “Looking back now, I remember things. I was scared to fly for the first time when he took me to Utah. I remember him buying a small stone in the airport, it had a saying on it, like ‘you’re beautiful’ or something.” Mom waves her hand like she’s dismissing the words. “He held it in his hands, rubbing his fingers and thumbs over it for a few minutes before he handed it to me. I thought he was being shy, sweet.” She rolls her eyes.

“But as soon as he gave me the stone, I wasn’t worried about flying anymore. Didn’t have any reservations about leaving with him at all. When I got off the plane, I remember thinking how strange it was, but then we had so much to do and so many other things to worry about, it was almost like I forgot.”

“That’s kinda like what you did to me,” I comment. “When we got pulled over, you made the cop believe that you gave him my driver’s license. Then it was like I totally forgot about it.”

Mom’s eyes go a little wide. “You remember?”

“Not until recently. One of the guys asked me a question, and the memory trickled in, as if it had always been there, but out of reach.”

Mom nods slowly. “I bonded with Wyatt, but I never really got the chance to explore my ability before he was gone. What I can do is more like an optical illusion. I gave him a card, so he thought it was a driver’s license. I wasn’t even sure it was going to work.”

“You seem surprised I remembered,” I press, pushing for more information.

“You never said a word about it. As soon as you rolled up the window and pulled away, it was like you had completely forgotten it had happened. I figured you had.”

I let the information sink in. If Mom left right after Wyatt died—and that wasn’t very long after getting her ability—it makes sense she doesn’t fully understand it. She might have even avoided using it because it would have made her think of Wyatt, and I know that’s painful for her.

Would I have ever explored my abilities if it weren’t for the guys? Maybe

at some point, but I'm not so sure—especially after the incident where I fried the power to the house.

“Amanda, we need to talk about what Leon did to Wyatt,” Ares says, interrupting my thoughts.

CHAPTER 8

Mom visually shrinks in on herself. “I don’t want to talk about that,” she rushes out hastily.

Ares opens his mouth to argue, but I glare at him sideways. “We don’t have to talk about what Leon did. Maybe if you just help us understand why he thought he would get Wyatt’s ability if he... hurt him,” I stammer, trying to make it easier on her.

Mom bites her bottom lip, her head shaking in denial. “Amanda,” Rosa speaks up. “We need to know how to protect the kids. I know this must be terribly hard, but please help us make sure they’re safe,” she pleads.

Mom looks over at me, and then her eyes then dart to each member of my Infinity. She snuffles before closing her eyes briefly. “He was jealous of Wyatt’s ability the moment Wyatt found us.” Her voice is thick with emotion.

“At first, I think Wyatt was proud, he liked the way Leon acted like his ability was so special. But it got old.”

Ollie walks over from the kitchen, pulled in by her words.

“Wyatt started telling him no, that he didn’t want to try to mimic everyone’s ability. Leon got nasty and resentful really quickly.” Mom slides her hands down the front of her thighs.

Rosa stands from the opposite couch and goes to the kitchen. When she returns, it’s with a tall glass of water for my mom, and she accepts it with a grateful smile. Taking a sip, she continues, “Wyatt and I were spending more time alone, we bonded.” She peers over at me and her cheeks flush. “We even talked about moving back here. I knew my parents would help us, but every time we started making plans, something stopped us.”

“Leon?” Milo murmurs.

Mom nods. “Yes, I think so.”

“He knew what you guys were planning, and you think that he did something at dinner?” This time it’s Ollie who prompts her.

“He must have. But I don’t know what.” Mom scrubs a tear off her cheek as she recalls, “I remember waking up.” She reaches up and grabs a fistful of her shirt. “I had this wretched feeling. My chest hurt so bad, and I had to run to the toilet before getting sick all over. I didn’t even remember how I had gotten to bed.”

She brings both palms up to cover her face and talks through her hands. I look over at Ares, wondering if this is really necessary, and I notice his face is grim. He’s not enjoying this either.

“Oh, Wyatt,” she sobs to herself, her shoulders shaking with the effort. “I found Leon leaning over him in the bathroom, he was holding something to Wyatt’s bare chest. His lips were moving like he was mumbling, but I couldn’t hear anything.” Mom drops her hands from her face, and I can see the streaks of tears streaming down her cheeks as she licks her top lip.

“I shoved Leon away from Wyatt, and he fell to the floor, but Wyatt was already gone. I knew it the moment I saw his face.” Mom swallows, her throat bobbing as if it took more effort than I can imagine speaking those words out loud. I lay my hand on her thigh, and a small gasp leaves my lips. I can actually feel the warmth of her leg under my hand, feel the coarseness of the denim of her jeans on my fingers.

“I ran. I didn’t look back. Didn’t see if there were anything I could have done to save him.” She openly sobs while I’m still reeling from my new sense of touch.

“I left him there. On the bathroom floor. With the man who hurt him.” My mom’s voice cracks as she stumbles over the words. With one final whimper, she jumps up from the sofa and bolts from the room.

“Mom,” I call to her, already following. I feel a hand on my inner elbow, and I look back to see Milo.

“Give her a little time, Laura,” he advises me solemnly.

I look back in the direction she ran. “Are you sure? She was so upset.”

“I’ll find her in a little while, Laura,” Rosa promises. “I think that’s enough for tonight though. Why don’t you order a couple pizzas?” She looks over at Mal. “I don’t really feel like cooking tonight.”

“I got it.” Mal places a soft kiss on Rosa’s lips before standing. She leans

back into William's embrace as a heavy sigh leaves her.

Ollie and Milo follow Mal into the kitchen, while Ares settles himself deeper into the couch, his eyes unfocused as he gazes straight ahead.

Dante places his lips near my temple. "Can we get out of here for a few minutes?" he whispers.

I close my eyes when I feel his breath cascade over the side of my face. I don't even speak, but I nod eagerly.



"THANK YOU," I utter, as soon as we're out of earshot of the kitchen. Dante made an excuse that we were going to grab a few things that had been left behind in Ares's room while we waited for the pizza.

He pushes open the door to Ares's room, reaching for the light switch. "I thought you could use a few minutes to process."

The room is all but empty, the two beds that were pushed together have been moved to the new house. There's a television on the floor, but not much else. "Wow, Ares would love this," I say jokingly.

"Almost looks like it used to." I can hear the smile in Dante's voice as he walks over to the spot where the bed used to be and sits down. He beckons me over with a roll of his wrist. "We have a few minutes, come take a breather."

I don't need any more prompting. I shuffle over to him and take a seat near his side. Dante lays his open palm on his leg, inviting me to hold his hand. I sigh as I place my hand over his, then lean my head on his shoulder. "When I touched my mom's leg, I could feel her," I confess. It's a little spot of brightness in this craziness. "Maybe it's wearing off."

With his free hand, Dante reaches up and strokes his fingers over my cheek. "What's it like?"

I shrug. "A little weird, if I'm being honest. I keep doing everything out of habit, not even thinking about the feeling that has always come along with picking up a box or touching a hairbrush. Then it's like a shock when I can see the brush in my hand, but I don't feel it." I open and close my empty palm.

"That would be strange." Dante places a soft kiss on my forehead. I lean farther into him, craving his touch. "It sounds like Ares might have been right

though. We'll figure it out."

I curl closer to him, bringing my left hand up to rest on his stomach. Dante sucks in a breath when my fingers push up his shirt so I can feel his skin under my hand. "This okay?"

He shifts a little, and I feel his muscles bunch under my palm. "Anything you want." Dante's voice drops lower. I tilt my head up so I can see him, his lips are parted enough that I can see the tips of his canines. Warmth pools in my lower stomach.

"Anything?" My voice is husky in response to his.

Dante leans his face down a little and confirms, "Anything." He licks over his bottom lip.

Pulling my hand out from under his shirt, I grab a fistful of the fabric and drag myself up his body, throwing my leg over his lap so I'm straddling him. Dante's head thumps against the wall behind him. "I want to feel your hands on my body," I whisper against his lips.

Dante's hands land on my hips. "Like this?" he questions.

I narrow my eyes at him and shake my head. With my right hand, I reach for his and glide his palm up my body until the weight of my breast is in his hand. "When I tell you to touch me," I nip Dante's lower lip, "I want you to *touch* me."

His tongue swipes across his bottom lip, and the hand still on my hip slides around to cup my butt, then he jerks me forward so we're chest to chest. I can feel the hot length of him under me. I place my forehead against his, our heavy breaths mingling as I almost pant against him.

I know this is the last thing we should be doing, and in the worst place, too, but it's hard to steal away for a few minutes of alone time.

I lower my lips to Dante's, teasing him with soft, open-mouthed pecks and little nibbles over his lips. He brushes his thumb back and forth over my nipple, but I need more. I want to feel the warmth of his hand, the pads of his fingers as he touches me.

Pulling back, I settle my weight over him. Dante's lips part as he exhales. "Take my shirt off," I instruct. He releases my breast and reaches for the hem of my t-shirt. I raise my arms in the air as he pushes the material up my body. His hands bump over my ribs, over my breasts still in my lacy green bra, until they glide over my arms, taking the fabric off.

Dante fists my shirt, bringing it up to his nose, and he inhales, his eyes closing as he lets out a long low rumble from his chest. When his eyes open

slowly, they're more orange than amber. "You smell like home." He releases the shirt and lowers his head as he peers at me from under his lashes. I trail my fingers down his shoulders and chest until I reach the bottom of his shirt. Sliding my hand under the fabric, I run my fingers back up his torso until I reach his neck. I don't take the time he did when he slowly removed mine. Turning my hand over, I hook my finger in the thin material, and my nail rips right through. Dante's breathing picks up. I jerk my arm down and the material splits like my fingers are tipped with razors. The fabric falls away from his chest and stomach, leaving a single black band around his neck where I left the collar intact.

If I had more time, I'd carve away every inch of the black shirt, except for that glorious black collar. But I'm far too impatient.

I wrap one arm around the back of his neck and line up our bodies. Shifting my weight forward, I can't stop myself from grinding down on him. I feel Dante's shoulders bunch as his entire body tightens in response.

Placing my mouth near his ear I rasp, "Need you to touch me, Dante." Both of his hands are immediately on my body. He skates his fingertips over my back until his hands land on my butt. He pulls me against him tightly, then he lifts his hips from the floor. My head falls back with a breathy moan.

Dante's lips drop to my neck and throat, he licks and tastes me as we begin rocking against each other. But it isn't enough, no. I need all of him. "Dante, do you have protection?"

His arms tighten around me, and on a growl, he answers, "Yes."

Scooting back enough so I can climb off him, I stand. I reach my hand down to pull him up. Dante places his hand in mine but lifts himself off the floor. I glance around the empty room, my eyes stopping on the bathroom door. Decision made, I tow him behind me and push through the door.

It's dark, but I don't care. I spin around as soon as the door closes behind him. Dante goes rigid when I snuggle my body as close as possible to his. "We don't have much time, but I need to feel you. I want you." Since I can't see, I open up my senses. I can feel Dante's heart thumping against my chest, beating in tandem with mine. His scent is stronger, and it makes the animal inside me almost crazy with need.

Dante's hand skims up my spine until I feel his palm slide into the back of my hair, he cradles the back of my head and nuzzles his nose against mine, moving over to my ear. "Take whatever you need."

I open my eyes and lick my top lip. I can feel the sharp points of my teeth

against my tongue. I want to take my time exploring him, see what makes his breath catch, see what it's really like to have him under me, but we don't have time for that. The others are waiting for us, but I'm not willing to leave this room without having him. "Where's the condom?"

With one of his hands still in my hair, I feel him reach into his front pocket with the other and pull out a small square, his knuckles brushing against the skin on my stomach as he does.

I reach for his pants, popping the buttons open quickly. Once I push his pants off his hips, I step back. I don't know how well he can see in the dark, but I can make out his shape just fine as he stands there with his chest heaving and his pants around his ankles.

I crouch down and caress his calf, and Dante jerks in response, startled. I bite my lip as I try not to grin. He lifts his foot out of the denim easily, then kicks the other leg off.

I stand, then grab his hand and tow him over to the sink. Releasing him, I face the mirror, even though I can't see anything. Dante comes up right behind me, a low growl leaving his chest when he makes contact with my back. Leaning forward, I push my pants off my hips and his hands slap the bathroom counter as he curls around me.

"Put the condom on, Dante," I demand, writhing my backside against him. His hands disappear from beside me, and I hear the packet as he rips it open. He steps back far enough to reach down and slide the condom on, and the smell of latex is heavy in the air. I lift my lip in a sneer, but I don't have time to dwell on why I don't like the scent. Dante is right behind me again, his palm running up over my back as I lean forward.

"Are you sure you're ready?" He dips his fingers between my legs, testing me. A rumble slides up his throat. "Mine." His voice is deeper than I've ever heard it.

I push back against him to show him I am ready. Dante guides himself into me slowly, rocking forward inch by inch. Impatient, I try to push myself against him harder, but between his weight and the counter at my waist, I can't maneuver the way I want to. When he pulls almost all the way out, I spin to face him, my hands going to his chest I push him back.

Dante's mouth drops open as he lets out a gasp. "I'm sorry—" He starts to apologize, but I interrupt him.

"Lie down." His mouth snaps closed. Keeping his eyes locked on mine, he lowers himself to the floor. I bend down to remove my pants from my

legs. Kneeling on the hard tile, a brief thought of his comfort enters my mind before it's obliterated by the thought of climbing on top of him.

I crawl toward him, my head lowered as I watch him from under my lashes. He sucks in a breath when I nuzzle my face against his hip. As I settle over him, with my hands over his shoulders and my knees next to his hips, he blinks up at me slowly. He's so fucking sexy, and he's not even trying. Every inch of him is the graceful predator, and every inch of him is mine.

Reaching down, I grab hold of him and lower my body so we join again. I grind against him, so he sinks as deeply as possible inside me. My head falls back, and a moan of pleasure leaves my lips. Dante's hands move to my hips, and he squeezes.

Now that he's seated inside me, I voice my concern. "Are you okay?" I can't feel the hard floor under my knees, but it must be killing his back.

As if to argue with me, Dante lifts his hips, pushing even deeper inside me. "So fucking perfect," he mutters, his hands sliding up and palming my breasts.

Accepting his response, I forget about him being on the hard floor, I forget we're in a bathroom, I forget everything but the way he feels under me. How his breath catches when I plunge down, how his eyes close and he looks like he's in the sweetest pain when I lift up, making sure to squeeze my inner muscles as I do.

It's not long before I'm chasing my orgasm. Each movement becomes faster and faster as I swivel my hips and rock against him. Dante lifts his head off the floor with his chin tipped down so he can see where we're joined. He bares his teeth and his canines are larger than usual. Unable to resist, I lean down to bite his bottom lip, and the new position places pressure against my clit, causing waves of tingles to pass over me.

Taking advantage of the position, Dante wraps his arm around the back of my neck and lifts his hips, pounding into me. I go rigid above him, afraid one move will make the burgeoning orgasm disappear. A low whimper of need has me releasing his lips and shaking above him. Wave after wave of pleasure hits me so hard my legs tremble, then Dante folds his other arm around me and rolls. His elbow cushions my neck, and my knees go higher on his waist as he kneels between my legs. I don't even think my back touches the ground as he buries himself inside me. My legs are still quivering from my orgasm when he thrusts against me a few more times before finding his own release.

Several seconds later he lowers me to the ground, and his hands start a lazy pattern of petting every inch of my body not covered by his. My eyes close as I luxuriate in the feeling of rightness settling over me. Who knew it could ever be like this?

CHAPTER 9

Dante plants a small kiss on my temple before heading out of the bathroom. I need to clean up a bit before going back out there. Dread settles over me—what if my mom knows what we were doing in here? I shake my head, trying to dispel those thoughts. I can feel the heat rise in my cheeks as a blush blossoms over my cheeks.

After taking care of business, I wash my hands and bring a little cold water up to my face. It will abate any lingering redness and help me focus.

Dante is waiting just outside the bathroom door, and when I open it, he looks me over. Seeing the way his lids lower as he bites his bottom lip alleviates all of the guilt I was feeling for stealing away together. Without a word, I reach for his hand, and we head back to the rest of our family.

Milo tilts his head back on the couch to see us as we enter from the kitchen. “Pizza should be here any minute. Rosa went to go talk to your mom, and the guys are keeping an eye on them.” It’s that simple. No questions on where we were or why we left.

I settle on the couch beside Milo with Dante next to me. Ollie and Ares are on the couch across from us. I look around, noticing it’s just the five of us here, and it reminds me of the beginning. I lay my open palm on Milo’s leg, and his hand settles against mine immediately. I was so confused back then, not sure who I was, who they were, or how we fit together. None of those thoughts even matter anymore. The only thing that does matter is making sure everyone is safe from Leon so we can all get on with our lives—my mom included.

The doorbell rings. “I got it.” Ares stands up and heads out of the living room at a brisk pace. I hear the front door open moments later.

Dante jumps up cursing. “Shit.” He runs from the room, following after Ares.

“What’s wrong?” An uneasy feeling settles in my stomach. “Oh, God.” Realization dawns too late. Dante backs into the room with his hands outstretched, fending off Ares.

Ares shows no signs of slowing down as he shoves Dante out of the way, and his eyes lock on mine. The darkness I see there isn’t anything like the usual obsidian I recognize when he looks at me. No, his gaze is almost empty as he stares at me with his eyes fully black. Milo moves to stand in front of me as Dante comes back between Ares and us. “Ares, this isn’t you. You’re stronger than this. Whatever you’re feeling, it isn’t real.”

“Get her out of here, Ollie,” Milo insists, as the width of his shoulders expands.

Ollie grabs my hand and starts tugging me backwards, but my feet feel rooted to the ground. I can’t look away as Ares reaches out and shoves Dante to the side again like he’s nothing.

“Ares,” I gasp, shocked at how violent the move was. His head slants to the side as he examines me. He blinks several times, but his face hardens, and he takes a few more steps in our direction.

“Laura, they can handle this. We need to go.” Ollie doesn’t give me a chance to argue. He lifts me up from behind and spins. As we’re turning, I catch a glimpse of Ares as he lowers his head and rushes toward Milo. A scream of terror bellows up from my throat.

Ollie rushes into the hall where he sets me on the floor. I hear when Ares slams into Milo, and the grunts and curses that follow.

Ollie places his hands on my cheeks and forces me to look at him instead of behind me. “We need to go. If he gets hold of you and shadow walks, we won’t ever find you.” I swallow as a pained shout comes from the living room. I close my eyes and pretend I didn’t just hear Dante shouting in pain.

Hand in hand, Ollie and I run to the side door, neither of us bothering with shoes. Rocks dig into my feet as we rush over to the Suburban. “Fuck!” Ollie shouts and slams the door. “No keys.” He pulls me over to the garage and flings the door open. Ollie hits the light switch and rushes over to a small red car. He peers into the window before moving to the next—Ares’s Range Rover. “Finally, get in.” He opens the passenger door and all but shoves me inside. Rounding the car, he hops in, hits a button on the dash causing the engine to purr to life as he taps a button near the sun visor to open the garage.

The tires squeal as he reverses into the driveway. He makes a tight turn, and then we're flying down the long drive. I turn around and angle between the two front seats to stare out the back window. My heart is still racing with fear for the guys and my mom.

"Stop the car!" I yell. Ollie turns his head to look at me but doesn't slow down. "Ollie, stop the car. My mom is in the house. He could go after her. We need to get her." Ollie peels out as he makes the turn out of the drive. Thank goodness no one was coming, because he didn't even slow down.

"I'm sorry, Laura, but we can't. He was coming after you."

"Ollie." I smack his arm, still looking behind us. "We have to go back."

"I can't," he says sadly, looking in the rearview mirror. "I'm sorry, but I can't."

I throw myself back into the seat, a wail of frustration bubbling up my throat. "How could we forget and let him answer the door alone?" I punch my hands down onto my thighs. "How long will it last? Do you think he's going to be okay? They won't really hurt each other, right?" My words are as frantic as my thoughts.

Ollie rolls his lips in, not giving me an answer. "We need to keep moving. I have no idea if Ares can track you through your bond or not. We can't go home, not to our parents' houses." Ollie's leg is bouncing up and down as he glances behind us again. It's like he expects Ares to just pop up. That's not even that farfetched at this point.

I fold my arms over my chest as Ollie speeds us into the night.



"SHE'S SLEEPING," Ollie whispers. I open my eyes to see him, and he's still driving. I blink at the glow of the clock coming from the center console. It's almost three o'clock in the morning. I bolt upright, memories of what we left behind slotting into place as I wake.

"Who is it? Is everyone okay?" My voice is hoarse. I cried myself to sleep a few hours ago. My eyes still feel gritty and swollen.

"It's Mal."

"Where are Ares, Milo, and Dante?" My voice is quickly becoming hysterical. Ollie pulls the phone from his ear and taps a button. Mal's calm voice fills the interior of the SUV. "—nted me to tell you everyone is okay."

He cuts in. “We think it’s worn off. Ares is... Ares is Ares. He seems to be under control.” Mal sounds exhausted as he stumbles over the words.

“Why didn’t Ares or one of the others call us?” My voice is high-pitched.

“Laura,” Mal murmurs. “Honey, they asked me to give you the message. I’m sure you’ll hear from them soon. They need to make sure that everyone is...” He pauses. “Themselves.”

“What about my mom, is she okay?”

“She’s fine, she and Rosa left just a few minutes after you. I think they’re headed to a hotel now. If you want, you can meet them there,” he offers.

“No, we need to come back. I’m glad they’re safe, but I need to come home.”

Mal lets out another long sigh. “They aren’t here, I don’t know where they went. They wouldn’t tell me.”

“Did they go home?” I ask, even though he just said he didn’t know where they were.

“I don’t think so. Why don’t you guys meet us at the hotel? William and I are heading there now.” I hear some mumbled words in the background. “The Hilton, in town,” Mal adds.

“We’re hours away.” Ollie guides the SUV to the side of the road, turning on his hazards.

“Well, maybe just get a hotel where you are. I’m sure you’ll hear from them soon. You guys need to get some sleep.”

I look at Ollie, pleading with him to take us back. “Maybe we will,” he answers noncommittally. I shake my head in denial. “Call us if you hear anything else,” he tells Mal.

“Will do. You guys take care; be careful.”

“Thank you, Malcolm, for helping me and my mom. I’m sorry we’re such trouble,” I rush out before Ollie can end the call.

Ollie lays his hand over mine before Mal can respond. “Ain’t none of this your fault, Laura, you or your momma’s. Get some rest. We’ll figure it out.”

The line goes dead. I peer up at Ollie. “Don’t even think like that,” he admonishes, squeezing my hand.

“Where are we?” I ignore his demand and look out the front window.

“Florida,” Ollie slurs around a yawn, settling back into the seat, his eyes closing.

“Let me drive for a little while so you can get some sleep.”

He opens one eye, leering at me. “And where would you be driving to?”

“Back home. We shouldn’t be this far from the others.” The feeling of anxiety bubbling in my stomach tells me how true the words are.

Ollie’s eyes close again. “We should wait until we hear from them before we head back. If Ares or Milo wanted us there, they would call.” His voice is soft, and I can hear the edge of defeat in his words. With just a little convincing, I’m sure I could get him to agree to go home.

“We’re hours away, we won’t even make it there until morning. We should just head back that way, and when they do call, we’ll be closer.” Ollie turns his head and gives me a sideways glower. I quickly add, “I promise, we’ll wait until we hear from them before we go to them. I don’t even know where they are.”

He blows out a heavy breath, his cheeks puffing. “Are you sure you’re awake enough to drive? I’ll probably fall asleep. Maybe we should just crash for a few hours at a hotel.”

“I’m wide awake, Ollie. I’ve been sleeping for hours,” I insist. It’s the truth. I don’t even know how I was able to fall asleep earlier, but there’s no going back to sleep for me now.

“You better not crash Ares’s Rover, he would kill me if you got hurt,” Ollie mumbles while reaching for the door handle. Excited that he’s giving in, and so easily, I hastily reach for the door, fumbling a little, so I can get into the driver’s seat.

When we go to pass each other at the rear of the vehicle. Ollie snags me around the waist. I look up into his sleepy eyes, the color is off with only the glare of the rear lights of the SUV to highlight them. He studies my face. “If you get tired or lonely, wake me up.” I nod and lean up on my tippy toes to capture his lips in a sweet kiss, but Ollie has other ideas. The moment my lips touch his, he responds hungrily.

Ollie’s usual teasing kisses are replaced with an almost desperate need to be closer as he drags me against his body. He’s all long, lean lines of sinewy muscle and heat. I reach up to his jaw, feeling the fine, soft stubble grazing my palm. He tilts his head as our noses brush. Abruptly, he stops the kiss and places his forehead on mine, his eyes still closed.

“We have to be more careful. I can’t believe Leon’s ability affected Ares.” Ollie lets out a shuddering breath. The fear and worry he must have worked so hard to keep hidden are leaking out now that he thinks everything is okay. I drag him down to me and wrap my arms around his neck. The threat of what Leon is truly capable of is much more real.

“We will be more careful, and we’ll stay together. No more letting him separate us.” Placing my heels back on the ground, I give Ollie’s shirt a tug and glance around the deserted two-lane road. I haven’t seen another car’s headlight since Ollie’s voice woke me up when he answered Mal’s call a few minutes ago.

“I hope you have GPS, because I have no clue where we are or how to get us home.” I add some lightness to my tone. Ollie was strong for both of us earlier. I want him to know I can be strong too. I want him to rest knowing I will get us back to our Infinity.

He gives me a dry chuckle in response. “If we don’t find a gas station soon, it won’t even matter.”

CHAPTER 10

“*I*n two hundred feet, make a legal U-turn when possible.”

“Are you kidding me right now?” I growl, peering over at Ollie. His head is leaning against the window, and his mouth is hanging open. A grin lifts my lips, until I realize I probably looked just like that when I was sleeping.

“I don’t think this road is on a map, the GPS can’t even connect.” I’m talking to myself, but who cares. It’s just past dawn, and I’ve been driving for a little over three hours. Ollie wasn’t kidding when he said he drove all the way down to Florida.

He stayed awake until we found a gas station near the expressway, but that was a while ago. I was doing fine until the stupid app told me there was an accident ahead, and if I wanted to avoid it and heavy traffic, I could hit the button for rerouting. I should not have hit the button. I’ve been stuck on back roads and two-lane highways for the last hour. Pretty sure the coffee I got when we filled up was a bad idea, because now I need to pee.

I glance down at the phone again to make sure I do indeed need to make a U-turn. Yup, the blue line has me headed right back the way I came. I pull off to the side and let the two other cars behind me pass. When the road is clear, I pull out and turn around.

“Continue for six point seven miles and make a right on Secore Road.”

“Whatever, you’re crazy, I should have got a map instead of the coffee.” At least the SUV drives nice—a hell of a lot better than the motorhome—but I’ve been in this car for hours. No matter how nice it is, I want to get home.

I run my fingers over the phone screen, wondering if I should try to call one of the guys. Shouldn’t they have called us by now? But what if

something happened to them? Shit, what if one of them is hurt?

I reposition myself, bouncing my left leg. I won't be able to ignore my need for a bathroom soon. I could stop now, walk into the tree line, but I really don't want to do that unless it's a real emergency.

I think I'll try calling them. Ollie is still sleeping soundly, and the GPS says we won't be home for almost three more hours. I don't think I can wait that long to hear from them.

I still have three miles before my next turn, so I tap the phone to bring up the home screen and hit the phone icon. The favorites pop up. There's a picture of Milo in a little circle at the top, but he's not looking at the camera. It looks like Ollie snapped it without him knowing. Dante's and Ares's names and pictures are right below it, but I hit Milo's name. It's already ringing when I bring the phone to my ear. I sit up a little straighter at the prospect of talking to him. The line clicks. "Hello?" I call, but an automated voice answers.

"You have reached—" I hang up before it can finish.

This time I hit Dante's contact. His gruff voice fills my ear on the second ring. "Ollie, everything okay?" I can tell by the way he sounds he was sleeping.

"It's me," I whisper back.

"Laura." His tone changes, he sounds more urgent, instantly more awake.

I almost feel guilty for waking him up, almost. "You never called." There's an accusation in my voice.

"Mal was supposed to call. Are you guys okay? Where's Ollie?"

"Ollie's sleeping. Mal did call. Why didn't you?" I keep my eyes on the road, waiting for my turn.

A heavy sigh comes through the line. "Ares was a little confused and a whole lotta pissed off when he came out of it." I hear a door shut, then the sound of running water.

"Are you peeing?" I groan.

"Yeah, sorry."

"I have to pee so damn bad, and that's just making it worse."

"Why can't you go to the bathroom?" The toilet flushes in the background.

"I'm driving."

"And Ollie's sleeping?" Dante sounds incredulous.

"He drove until three, and I wanted to get back home after we talked to

Mal. I'm driving so he can get some sleep. Oh, hang on, this is my turn. I need to check the directions again."

"You've been driving all night?" he growls at me.

"Just a sec, don't hang up. I'm switching to speaker." I switch the phone to speaker and flip on my blinker to make the turn.

"Are you still there?" I call as I turn.

"Yes, you shouldn't be driving all night—or talking on the phone while driving."

I roll my eyes. "Why didn't Milo answer? I called him first."

"Probably still sleeping. Are you paying attention to the road?" He sounds impatient.

"Yes, Dante," I drawl. "How do I switch it back to the GPS while I'm on the phone?"

"The GPS might not work if you're on the phone. But you swipe up from the bottom of the screen, just like if you want to switch apps."

"Dammit, I should have checked the next turn before I called." I guide the car to the shoulder of the road. I don't want to go out of my way even more. I look around, but there's not much to see.

"Where are you?"

"Somewhere in Georgia." I bounce in my seat.

"Just take the ninety-five until you get into South Carolina."

"The stupid GPS has me all turned around. I have to get out and pee in the trees," I growl, digging around looking for some napkins.

"What? Where the hell in Georgia are you?"

"I'm taking the phone with me," I warn him, and hit the button to disengage the locks.

"Wait, wake up Ollie. I don't want you going off in the woods by yourself," Dante urges me.

"It's not the woods, and it's not like I've never done it before." The SUV dings when I open the door.

"Laura, just wake up Ollie."

"No, I'll be done in, like, five seconds. Don't listen to me pee," I demand.

Dante lets out a real growl. Even though I can't really feel it, the stiffness in my legs registers when I get out of the car. Maybe it's a memory of how I know they should feel, or maybe I'm not quite so numb.

Phone in hand with Dante still on speaker, I high-step over some taller grass until I can make it to the tree line on the side of the road. The Range

Rover is only about twenty-five feet away.

“Why the hell didn’t you guys just go to a hotel last night?”

I peer around the tree and make sure no one is around to see me as I set the phone near a rock and drag my pants down to my ankles. “Because I wanted to come home,” I tell him.

“I mean, when you left here, why go all the way to fucking Georgia? Ares, wake up.” He bellows the last part.

“Don’t wake him up. Ollie didn’t know if Ares could track me. He wanted to keep us moving, so we went to fucking *Florida*,” I defended.

I finish my business and wipe. I feel a tad bad for leaving the paper on the ground, but I’m not bringing it back to the car.

“Florida. He took her all the way to Florida,” Dante announces.

“Yeah, well, maybe we wouldn’t have gone so far if you would have actually called us.” I’m scared and worried, but my words are coming out like I’m pissed.

Dante ignores me. “Ollie was worried you could track her. Could you?” he asks someone—Ares, I assume.

I hear some mumbling. “She’s pissing on the side of the road in Georgia,” he states acerbically.

“You know what? I called to make sure you guys were all right, not for you to act like I’m a complete idiot who can’t take care of myself.” I end the call without saying goodbye and stomp back to the car.

They’re all back home sleeping while I’m worried sick. I power off the phone and toss it in the center console. Ollie’s breath catches as he lets out a low snore. Careful not to slam the door, I buckle my seatbelt and turn on my turn signal to get back on the road. I’ve lived my entire life without the use of GP-fucking-S and been just fine. I sure as hell don’t need it now.



“YOU SEEMED SO eager to get home, but now that we’re only a few miles away, you’re stalling.” Ollie eyes me over the small table between us. I glance around the small restaurant looking for a valid excuse as to why I had him stop here. He takes a deep pull from the fat straw in his strawberry-banana milkshake, waiting for my response.

“Not stalling.” I’m totally stalling. Ollie woke up when I pulled into the

gas station near the expressway. I wanted another drink and some snacks before I got back on the road. He's been driving ever since. I tried to sleep, but my mind wouldn't shut off.

"The fact that you wanted to stop here had nothing to do with the reason my phone is off and why you've been borderline pissed since I woke up, does it?" He takes another draw off his shake as he studies me with his clear, green eyes.

I look away, pretending to be interested in the salt and pepper shakers. "No," I scoff.

Ollie purses his lips and gives me a patronizing nod. "Sure." He sends me a naughty grin just after, telling me that he knows what I'm up to and doesn't mind.

"I guess you could call them; I never did find out where they were." I shrug my shoulders and run my finger over the table.

Ollie drags his phone out of his pocket and holds the button on the side to power it on. After a few seconds, the phone begins to vibrate and send several alerts. He peers up at me with raised brows. "I'm thinking Dante, Ares, and Milo all had something they wanted to say to you." Ollie flips the phone around so I can see the screen. There are several missed calls and unanswered messages from all three of them.

I try to act innocent, pretending not to care, but it's not true. I am angry they didn't call us and tell us what happened. Angry that I was away from them, and it didn't seem to bother them the way it bothered me.

"Let's go," I mumble, sliding out of the booth seat.

Ollie is quick to follow, his phone already up to his ear. I speed walk so I don't have to hear what Ollie or the others are saying.

Ollie still has the key fob, so I get into the passenger side and shut the door. He makes his way to the car, his face having lost the playfulness he had at the restaurant. His lips are moving fast, but it doesn't look like he's the one getting a reaming—more like he's the one doing all the yelling.

He jerks the phone from his ear and mashes the screen with his finger. When he looks up, our eyes connect. The stiffness in his shoulders eases, as well as the firm line of his lips.

After a brief moment of us just staring at each other, he rounds the car and slides into the driver's seat.

"They're at home. But we don't have to go there right now if you don't want to, Muenster. We can drive right back to Florida. Hell, we can drive to

Michigan if you want.” Ollie settles himself back into the seat, waiting for me.

“Nah, Michigan is cold as hell in December.” I reach over and place my hand on his. “Maybe in the spring.” I give Ollie the same cheeky wink he likes to give me, just to show him how much I appreciate his understanding.

“I’ll hold you to that. You, me, Michigan, spring. Sounds amazing.”

The drive home is quick. I spy the florescent green triangle that marks the drive as Ollie slows the SUV for the turn.

“What did they say? Are they mad I shut off the phone?” I ask, finally finding the courage to.

“I only talked to Milo.” Ollie turns his head to look at me briefly, with lines of confusion marring his forehead before focusing back out of the windshield. “He sounded worried, but not mad.” Ollie lowers his voice as the house comes into view. “You don’t have anything to worry about. Let’s go find out what happened last night.”

Ollie parks in front of the open garage. “Should the door be open? Someone could walk right in.” I exit the SUV, waiting for Ollie to join me.

“I’m sure they opened it for us, come on.” Ollie snags my hand and pulls me into the garage. All of Milo’s building materials are piled up on the floor—sheets of drywall and stacks of two by fours. Several tools are littered on the ground among them.

I’m a little surprised Ares or Dante aren’t down here waiting for us. Maybe they really are upset with me? Oh, well. I’m not too happy with them either. I drop Ollie’s hand as he urges me upstairs.

“Where is everybody?” I inquire when we emerge into the empty kitchen.

Ollie goes directly to the fridge, pulling out a container of juice and drinking right from the carton. “No clue,” he replies after wiping his lips with his wrist.

“Well, you talked to someone, right? Are they even here?”

“We’re here.” Milo comes into the kitchen from the living room area. He has a bruise across his jaw and a black eye.

“Oh my God! What happened to your face?” I rush over and reach up to touch him, but pull back, worried I might hurt him.

Milo tips his head back. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine. Is that... did Ares do that?” I whisper the last part of the question.

Milo takes hold of my hand, his eyes soft. “It wasn’t Ares,” he appeals to

me, trying to make me understand. “He didn’t even do it on purpose, we were just trying to hold him, and he was struggling.” Milo looks off to the side, before meeting my eyes again and licking his lips.

“Where’s Dante?” I look around Milo’s bulky shoulder, expecting Dante to be behind him. I want to see Ares too, but I think he’s going to avoid me. I know he’s probably punishing himself for what he did to Milo, probably blaming himself for even answering the door in the first place.

“He just got back from a run; he’s getting dressed.” Milo nods his head toward the upstairs bedroom.

“He shifted?” Ollie settles his rear against the kitchen counter near the sink.

“Yeah, he thought he would be back before you guys.” Milo sends a look in Ollie’s direction, and something unsaid gets exchanged between them.

I cross my arms over my chest, not liking the feeling that I’m being left out of something. “Why does it matter if he was back before us?”

Milo peers down at me and blinks. “Just so you could have seen him first, not this.” He waves his hand over his face, indicating the bruising.

“Dante didn’t get hurt?” I question, a little surprised he fared better than Milo.

That gets me a wince. “That’s why he shifted, so he could heal faster,” Milo reluctantly responds.

“How bad was it?” A ball of regret takes root in my stomach. Was I too hard on them for not getting back to me sooner?

Milo cups my cheek with his palm. “Nothing too bad, Laura, just some bruises. But I don’t heal as fast as he does, his metabolism works so much faster than ours. We just thought it would be best if you didn’t see the evidence of what happened first thing when you got home.”

“Is that why Ares isn’t here too? How bad is he?” I lean into Milo’s touch.

“I’m fine.” Ares’s voice comes out flat—completely monotone—as he enters the kitchen.

I study him. He looks way less than fine. His posture is rigid, his mouth is a thin slash. His eyes are pointed toward me, but he’s not really looking at me. Movement catches my eye, and I notice the knuckles on his left hand are red and swollen. There’s a bandage over the first one.

I swallow the lump forming in my throat, thinking about him hitting Dante or Milo. I know it’s got to be killing him knowing he did that, and that

he wasn't in control of himself. Ares is a master of many things, control just being one.

I pat Milo's hand, which is still on my cheek, and pull away from him. All the frustration I felt at them for not calling falls away, until all I feel is the need to make sure they're all okay. Ares certainly doesn't look like he is. Milo defending Ares's actions proves that he doesn't blame him, now we just need to make sure Ares won't blame himself.

When I take a step in Ares's direction, he takes a step back, like a skittish kitten. His eyes go a little wide as his calm exterior falls away. He doesn't want me to get any closer. His eyes jump to Milo, like he might stop me from moving toward him.

Now that I'm a little closer, I can see the lines of fatigue on his face and the dark swatches under his eyes, telling me he probably hasn't slept much at all. Ares's back hits the wall when I take another step in his direction, and he swallows.

I move into his space, making sure my front is pushing against his, and Ares sucks in a breath and flattens himself against the wall even more. I can't believe this man—this crazy, beautiful man—is acting like he's terrified of me all because Leon manipulated his will and influenced his behavior.

"Can we have a minute please?" Ares's eyes fall closed when I speak. Only to pop back open, wild and panicked.

"No, no. You guys stay," he demands, looking above my head. Without a word, Milo drops his hand on Ares's shoulder and squeezes, before he and Ollie walk into the other room, leaving us alone.

Ares can't even look at me. His eyes are jumping around the kitchen, not landing on anything longer than a second. He's looking for an escape.

I reach down and lift his injured hand, and he allows me to bring it up to my face and place a gentle kiss over the bandage. "I'm really glad you guys are all okay, Ares."

It shakes my foundation a little to see him so apprehensive. From the beginning, Ares has always been my constant, the one person who made sure I knew from that first moment that he was all in with me. He's never been one to back down, and I don't want him to now.

"Do you want to talk about what happened?" I don't release his hand, but I lower it to our sides.

Ares swallows, his eyes darting to mine. "I was foolish." His gaze falls to the ground and his nostrils flare. "I wasn't thinking, and even if I had been, I

sure as shit wouldn't have thought someone like Leon could do anything to affect me. I was stupid and cocky, and my family got hurt because of it."

"So, you made a mistake." I tip my head down and peer up at him, forcing him to see me. "No one blames you, Ares. Not me, not Milo, and I'm sure Dante feels the same as we do. You didn't go to the door because you were cocky; you went to the door because that's what normal people do when the doorbell rings." I shake his hand, imploring him to listen.

"I could have hurt you." His voice comes out harsh, like he thinks he's telling me something I didn't already know.

"Yes, you could have. But you didn't, Ares. Milo and Dante, they stopped you. And Ollie made sure to get me out of there, to keep me safe."

Ares tries to remove his hand from mine, but I hold on tighter. "They shouldn't have to protect you from me, I should be the one protecting you." His face is hard, and for the first time his eyes are staring right into mine, but there's an edge of anger. I know the anger isn't directed toward me. No, all the animosity is focused inward.

I need to get through to him, but I'm not sure I know how. "Ares," I sigh his name. "Nobody is perfect. You pulling away from me, from us, is exactly what Leon would want. We're stronger together."

"Not if he can affect me that easily. Do you not get what I'm saying?" Ares's free hand slaps against his chest. "You don't know what I was thinking. It was like I was in the backseat of my own fucking mind. I tried fighting the influence, but I was useless, powerless." His back goes rigid, like even saying the words out loud are abhorrent to him and his physical body is denying the claim.

I take another step closer to him so there's no space between us. His eyes widen in panic again. "What are you doing?"

"Ares, I know Milo and Dante wouldn't have let us come back here if you were still a danger, and they definitely wouldn't have left me alone with you." I rest my other hand over his heart, where I can feel it racing under my palm.

"I want to touch you. Be close to you. I know what happened last night scared you, it scared me too, but he's not influencing you anymore. Please, don't let him take you away from me. Don't give him that power." I rest my head against his chest, sliding my palm around his side so I can wrap my arm around his back.

Ares holds his breath for several seconds before finally releasing a heavy

exhale. His body softens, and I feel his lips on the top of my head. I cuddle even closer, taking the hands that are still wrapped together and placing them around my back so he's hugging me in return.

After several long moments, Ares's heart rate slows, and his body adjusts so mine fits against him better. Eventually, I tip my head back so I can look up at him. He traces his fingers up the line of my throat and, mesmerized by the sight, his eyes dilate and his lips part.

"You give me far too much credit, *Cara*."

"That's not true, you've just given me really high expectations. I'm not willing to lose any piece of you."

Ares's eyes leap up to meet mine. The darkness bleeds out, covering his entire eye, but his expression is soft. Nothing like it was last night. I'm not afraid of him. Even when I knew there was something wrong, that he wasn't in complete control, I still didn't fear him. I might be foolish, but deep down, I don't think Ares would ever really hurt me, even if he was under Leon's influence. My mother said Leon's ability couldn't make you do something that went against your nature, and I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that hurting me goes against Ares's nature.

His fingers curl around my throat, and he uses his palm to tip my head back. My eyes fall closed, I know what's coming. He's going to kiss me. If I rush him, he'll end up making me wait, so I let my body go pliant against his.

"Your faith in me..." He blows out a breath, not finding the words. "I love you," he whispers against my lips, caressing me with his words.

Even though I have him pinned against the wall, Ares is in full control as he brushes his lips against mine. I let out a sigh of satisfaction when I feel his tongue lap across my mouth, seeking entrance. For several long moments, he worships my lips with his. He's being so gentle that I'm taken by surprise when he nips me, making my breath catch and heat pool in my lower stomach.

Ares ends the kiss, much to my disappointment, and he rocks his forehead against mine as we both get our breathing under control.

"I am sorry, Laura. I won't underestimate him again."

"None of us will," I confirm.

CHAPTER 11

We're in the living room in a circle of lawn chairs. I have a plate of fried eggs and toast in my lap, and I'm the last to finish. I made everyone a quick breakfast after Ares and I talked. Dante was on toast duty while Ollie took a quick shower. We know we need to talk about last night, but I think everyone is leery of bringing it up again.

Ares isn't exactly himself, but the relieved looks I saw Milo and Dante exchanging make me think he's at least a little better.

"So, how did you guys end up in Florida?" Dante glances between Ollie and me.

"I just started driving, and that's where we ended up. It's not like we were escaping for a beach trip," Ollie defends. "I figured one of you guys would call when it was safe for us to come back." That part comes out as a little dig.

"We should have." Ares rubs his hand down his face. "It was my fault. I asked them not to call you. I figured you were safer away from me, but I didn't know you'd been driving all night."

I reach for his hand, he hasn't gotten very far from me since our chat, and I'm taking that as a good sign. "Sorry I got pissy on the phone, Dante. I was worried."

"No, it's fine. We were all stressed, and I was kind of being a dick."

"You're always a dick," Ollie adds with a smile.

Happy that we are at least talking, I realize no one is asking the important questions.

"Well, we don't need to worry about testing the flyer anymore." I force some lightness in my tone, hoping my statement will get Ares talking about Leon's influence. He pulls his hand out from under mine quickly and stands.

“Will you tell us what happened?” I urge.

Ares finds his way to the corner of the room, the shadows already wrapping around his form to obscure him. “It was fast. The moment I touched the box, I knew I had fucked up, but it was too late.” His words are clipped, like angry barbs.

“How long did you hold the box?” Milo questions.

“Not long. To be honest, I don’t even remember putting it down.”

“Well, you didn’t have anything in your hands when you came back to the kitchen,” Dante reminds us.

“What was it like?” Ollie looks around like he might get bashed for asking the question. “Were you there watching, feeling, or did you just wake up after with no memory, like Amanda?”

“I was there. I was trying to fight it.” The room grows darker, colder.

“What was your goal?” That comes from Dante.

“To get Laura,” Ares admits.

“To do what?” Milo places his elbows on his knees and clasps his hands over his mouth. None of us want to be talking about this, thinking about this.

“I don’t know. It was like I just needed her, and I didn’t care what, or who, was in my way to get her.”

“Did you want to hurt her?” Ollie whispers the words softly.

An icy blast moves through the room, stirring my hair.

“No,” Ares growls, his voice deeper and darker than I’ve ever heard it.

I stand up slowly. Ares is barely visible now—the shadows are so thick. “He doesn’t mean you, Ares; we know you would never hurt any of us.” I step into the shadows and they coil around me in a physical sense. The air is thick, but not unpleasant. I lift my hand and wave my fingers through the inky fog. “Do you have any idea of what would have happened if the guys hadn’t stopped you?”

The path to Ares in the corner clears, but the darkness still shrouds us from the others. His hands are balled into fists at his sides, and I can see the struggle on his face as he thinks about the question.

Eventually, he shakes his head in denial. “I was really focused on getting to you, but I was also fighting the influence, and…” He pauses, and his voice lowers so I can hardly hear him. “I was fighting the darkest part of myself. He wanted to take over, but I was afraid he was under Leon’s control.” The confession is wrenched from Ares, like he’s ashamed of himself for letting it happen all over again.

Determined to make him come to me this time, to not hide behind his shadows, I stand apart from him, leaving a few feet between us.

“What do you think now? Was he?” I lick my lips as I think. It’s strange, almost like that part of Ares is the one talking to me.

Ares takes a long stride in my direction. Voice deep, he replies, “No, only one can control me.” Another icy blast chills the room. Without an ounce of reservation, he continues until he’s standing right before me. His head tilts like he’s assessing me, and the bright sparks are present in Ares’s black eyes.

“He should have let you free,” I murmur, laying my hand over his chest, his heart beating steady and strong.

“It won’t happen again.” Ares slams his lips against mine and steals my breath with a soul-searching kiss. He retreats just as quickly without warning. I’m left feeling breathless and needy.

“What the fuck! Are we sure he was okay? He was acting off. Where the fuck would he have taken her?” Ollie’s urgent voice pulls me from my thoughts. I turn to see the misty black fog sliding to the floor, like it’s being pulled by a vacuum.

“Jesus Christ, Ares!” Dante reaches forward and snags my arm, dragging me away from his brother.

Ares lifts the corner of his lip in a slight sneer but doesn’t say anything else. I grab Dante’s hand on my wrist. “That has nothing to do with Leon. He’s fine. We’re all fine,” I insist.

“Don’t go all dark and creepy right now, that’s not cool, Ares.” Ollie folds his arms over his chest and tips his chin up.

Ares tugs at the bottom of his wrinkled t-shirt like he would his vest. The fabric stretches and it catches him off guard. He looks down, almost surprised to find himself without his formal clothes.

“I’m not trying to be dark and creepy, Oliver. It’s my natural state,” Ares deadpans, but a miniscule smile graces his lips. I exhale a heavy breath. We just might get through this.

Dante goes into the kitchen and comes back with several cans of soda. After he passes them out, he, Ares, and I return to our seats.

After a few moments of rather tense silence, I say, “We need to figure out what Leon wants. Maybe we should take this up with the council you work for? Shouldn’t they help us? Do you guys have jail, or a legal system?”

“I not sure they would see him for the threat he truly is, since they didn’t do anything eighteen years ago,” Ares answers.

“The council is better at sweeping problems under the rug. I don’t think they’ve ever really dealt with anything like this. Most of what they do is protect us from the norms catching on to our abilities. No offense, Ares. I know you work with them.” Milo shrugs.

“None taken. You’re right. The stuff that happened with Leon and Amanda—no one even talks about it. They’d rather pretend it didn’t happen than deal with the fact that it did, and make sure nothing like that ever happens again.”

“So, what should we do?” Dante looks around the circle.

“Frankly, I’d rather just deal with him permanently.” Ares eyes me from the side, gauging my reaction. I don’t offer one. “I’m tired of waiting to see what he’s going to do. I think it’s time we should go after him,” he continues.

“What about the council?” I question again.

“I’ll make some calls, but I don’t know what support they could offer, except bodies. And I’m not sure we want a bunch of people around that could turn on us if they touch something Leon has influenced.” Ares opens his hands, at a loss for what else to say.

Ollie tips back on the legs of his lawn chair, his face pensive as he stares at the ceiling. “What did Amanda say when you asked if you could...” He wiggles his fingers near his head, indicating Ares looking through her memories.

“She’s not receptive. I don’t blame her after last night,” Ares adds quietly.

“It probably wouldn’t have been much help anyway. I mean, what’s the chances you’ve been to the house he was holding her at?” Milo offers.

“Well, I’m not going to let him keep controlling my life. He’s been keeping me prisoner for almost eighteen years. I just didn’t know who my jailer was,” I interject.

“He won’t, Laura, but we need to be smart about this, especially after last night.” Milo glances at Ares.

“What do you propose about how we go about finding him?” I try to ignore the fact that I know finding him might mean Ares is going to do something permanent, and I can’t even bring myself to acknowledge what that actually is.

“Last night would have been the perfect opportunity. I have to figure out what he wanted me to do once I had you, then we might be able to use that and convince him that his plan worked. That he was controlling me, but I

have no idea what he wanted. It was just an empty thought to get to you.” Ares rubs his hands over his face, his frustration visible.

“We might still be able to do that. Where’s the pizza box?” Ollie lifts his hands at Ares’s and Dante’s immediate protests. “Hear me out first,” he rushes to add. Ares snaps his mouth closed, but glares at Ollie. “What if Laura touched the box?”

“Are you fucking mad?” Dante yells at Ollie for even posing the question, but I can see the merit.

“Just listen, we’re only talking about it. I’m not suggesting she should go do it right this instant. But let me fucking finish,” Ollie barks, his face red as he sits up straighter in his chair. I’ve only seen Ollie this serious a few times, and it changes his entire demeanor.

“Fuck, you act like I’m stupid. I’m just trying to say,” his eyes slit, daring anyone else to interrupt him, “that if we let Laura touch it, she would know what the goal was, if it was to get us to fight, or for her to leave and go to him. But…” He stresses the word. “We could make sure she was safe, that she couldn’t leave. If she only wanted a fight, we could wait that out.” Once Ollie is able to convey his thoughts, the group goes quiet.

“It’s not a bad plan,” I comment, a little hesitant. I don’t want to be the guinea pig, but if we can figure out what Leon was planning, we might be one step ahead of him for the first time. “How long were you under his influence, Ares?”

His nose flares as he exhales. “Too long,” he mutters.

“About twenty minutes?” Milo answers, looking over at Dante for confirmation.

“About that, I’d say.” Dante’s eyes narrow as he agrees. “But it could be totally different for Laura. Ares is really strong, he’s been using his ability for years. We don’t have any way of knowing how she would react.”

“Okay, so we should plan for that. Assume it would take me twice as long to shake his influence.” Now that the idea has been brought up, I can’t help but think it might just work. I scoot forward to the edge of my seat. “We could finally get some answers.” I look at all four of them. “I’m tired of being the one always running. Let’s show him he should have left us alone while he had the chance.”

Milo’s eyes go a little wide at the vehemence in my tone and the anger seeping out of me. “I don’t know if this is a good idea, but what else do we have?”

“Laura’s right, we’re stronger than this. He’s one man, we’ve been letting him control us with fear of the unknown.” Dante nods his head, coming to the same conclusion.

I knew convincing Ares was going to be the hardest. I reach over and grab his hand. Letting him see the truth about what I’m going to say in my eyes, I stress, “I trust you guys. I know you’ll be able to keep me safe.” Ares’s lips thin and he doesn’t look persuaded, so I continue, “He took my mom from me, and a dad I never even got to know. I just want him to leave us alone, to leave my mother alone.”

Ares looks away from me, his shoulders bunching. “The box is still at the house,” he says, sounding defeated.

I clasp his hand harder in gratitude, since I know this is hard for him. “Thank you.”

He peers back at me. “Don’t thank me, *Cara*. If I can think of any way to prevent this from happening... I will.” He pushes off his chair and drags his hand away from me, leaving the room without another word.

Ollie lets out a heavy breath. “He’s probably going to kill me for even bringing it up.” He forces a chuckle.

“We better make sure nothing bad happens, because I’m pretty sure he would kill all of us if it does,” Dante mutters, while looking at his hands.

My resolve fades a little with their trepidation, but I’m convinced we’re doing the right thing. Leon has been using fear to control my entire life one way or another. Forever. It stops now.

CHAPTER 12

Ares is pacing the room like a caged animal. Ironic, since I'm the one who should feel trapped. I'm tucked into the small walk-in closet in the master bedroom on the main floor. We haven't used this room much. It should have been the first room renovated, but Leon thwarted our plans for that, too.

All the guys have thick, black gloves covering their hands as a precaution. Ares told me to change into long pants and a long-sleeved shirt to minimize my exposure to the box. It's easy to see how anxious he is about the whole thing. He spent most of the afternoon upstairs, trying to work out another plan. When he failed, he decided to put all his efforts into making this plan as foolproof as possible.

He pauses his stride. "You don't even need to pick it up. Leave it there, one finger." He holds up his finger to demonstrate. We all know what the *it* is he's referring to—the pizza box. He crosses his arms over his chest and peers down at me. "This might not even work, for all we know, the influence could be gone after one touch, or it's just worn off by now," he adds, sounding a little too hopeful.

"Yeah, whatever you need to tell yourself," Ollie mutters under his breath, but with the way Ares's neck snaps in his direction, I'm sure he was heard.

"I know," I tell Ares, hoping to distract him from Ollie.

Milo wrings his hands together. "What if she tries to shadow walk?" I'm surprised Ares isn't the one to bring this up, but I'm not too worried about it.

"I've only ever done it once, and I only managed to get across the room. I'm sure I've never been to the place Leon is hiding. I don't think I have

enough control to manage it,” I reason, praying that my assumptions are accurate.

“I could track her,” Ares informs us.

“You could?” Ollie sounds astounded.

“I’m confident I could. It’s the only reason I’m even going along with this plan in the first place. There’s no way I would chance losing you to him, no matter how much you begged, if I didn’t think I could.” His dark eyes bore into mine, challenging me. I’m the first to look away.

“Well, that’s good to know, but what about last night? If you could track her, why didn’t you just shadow walk to her?” Dante sounds mildly confused, his brows are furrowed.

Ares’s jaw tics, and I can almost hear the grinding of his teeth. “I couldn’t, I have to open myself to more power for that, and that was something I didn’t want to risk under Leon’s influence. I didn’t know if I could maintain any level of control after releasing it,” he admits.

“Next time, trust yourself.” I meet Ares’s eyes and I see a flash of white over his irises. Milo, Dante, and Ollie take turns looking between us. I’m not going to elaborate any more if Ares isn’t.

“All right, let’s get this over with.” I clap my hands together and take a step closer to the innocent-looking pizza box lying on the floor.

“Wait, why are you guys listening to me? No, this is a bad idea. We’ll figure something else out.” Ollie shakes his head quickly in denial.

I glance up with my hand poised over the box. “I love you all.” Before they have a chance to stop me, or even reply, I brush my fingertips over the cardboard. I don’t even feel the box under my fingers, but I can hear the sound it makes as my fingers scrape across the box top.

A whisper of power courses up from my fingertips. I feel it travel up my arm, and I instinctually grab my inner elbow to stop it from coming up any further, but that doesn’t work. Within seconds, a slimy feeling fills me, making me feel like someone is invading my space, looking too closely at me.

My mind goes a little foggy as anger fills me. My hands ball into fist and I look up to see all four guys staring at me like I’m some sort of science experiment. I hate the way they’re looking at me. Rage continues to build, my hands start to shake, and I’m clenching my teeth so hard my jaw aches.

I know what they’re thinking. I’m just a nobody, a poor girl who is barely managing to take care of herself and her crazy mom. My *mom*. A memory

tickles my thoughts, and I grab the sides of my head and close my eyes.

Something is wrong. This isn't right. I cover my face, trying to push back the ugly feeling of anger and resentment trying to bubble up inside of me.

"Laura?" I hear a deep voice. I know that voice. Would know that voice anywhere. It's Dante. I tilt my head to the side, waiting and listening for him to speak again. His voice soothes the jagged anger surging through me.

"Laura, what are you feeling?" His voice is nice—smooth, and deep—but his question pisses me off.

I pull my hands away from my head and sneer at him, I can feel the familiar pressure in my gums that tells me I'm shifting. He's the reason I'll never be normal. He's the reason, even now, that I'll always have to be invisible and make sure I don't let anyone see me and what a freak I am.

I take a step forward, not even sure what my intent is myself. Dante's eyes go round, and he steps back. That, more than anything, breaks through the fog of rage. I pull back and a sharp pain sears through my mind. I shake away the pain and try to remember what I was doing.

"Talk to her, Dante, she likes your voice," Ares mutters lowly.

The pain in my head recedes enough for me to think. "I'm supposed to be doing something." My voice sounds loud to my own ears.

"That's right, Laura. Whatever you're feeling—it isn't you." Dante takes a tentative step in my direction. "Tell us what you're feeling, thinking..."

I open and close my fists a few times, feeling my fingers straining from how tightly I had them clenched. "I'm angry," I spit, admitting it feels strange, because I can't figure out why I'm so angry.

I glance back at the guys, my guys. The rage I was feeling comes back when I see them staring at me. They're part of the reason I'll never be normal. Part of the reason I'll always be forced to hide who and what I am.

"Why are you angry?" Dante's tone is gentle. I want him to yell at me, like I want to yell at him.

I narrow my eyes at him, and the confusion is back. Why *am* I so angry? "I don't know!" I scream and grab hold of my head. The sharp pain is back, I've never had a headache this bad. "Stop looking at me! Stop staring at me!" I continue to shout, even though it makes the pain in my head worse. At least when the pain is there, I can't think about the anger. Something about it feels wrong.

"What should we do?" Ollie asks, sounding unsure. "She looks like she's in pain."

“Quit talking about me like I’m not here,” I snarl, and I’m leaning so far forward, my hands are in fists almost behind me. Ollie lifts his hands in a supplicating manner.

“I don’t like this. How much longer?” Milo pushes past Ollie so he’s standing closer to me.

“Well, I don’t like it either!” I match his sentiment. I want to fight with them, want an argument.

“Laura.” Ares tips his chin up and peers down at me from his considerable height. “What is it you want?” There’s an edge in his voice as he crosses his arms over his chest.

His confrontational stance makes the anger sing in my veins. “I want you to leave me alone.” But as soon as the words leave my lips, I know that’s not really what I want. Darkness dances over Ares’s eyes as he stares at me. He’s never looked at me like this before, and it sends a sliver of panic through me that overrides the anger simmering at the surface. Is he going to leave me now?

Before I can even respond, he drawls, “Well, too fucking bad. It ain’t happening.”

I lick my lips. “Something isn’t right,” I confess, shaking my hands in front of my body. It’s me, I’m here, but it still feels like there is something *else* here with me, too.

“Laura, you touched the box, remember?” Dante urges.

I look down at the pizza box, and a memory just out of reach teases my thoughts. I wanted to touch that box. “Leon,” I say, looking up.

The anger takes root and this time there’s a focus. My gums ache again, and I bend my knees, ready to spring at any second. He’s the real reason for everything. I want to rip him apart for what he did to my mom, my dad, to me.

I push off the balls of my feet, intending to find him so I can make him pay. Instead of going through the door, I slam against what might as well been a wall—Milo’s chest.

The air leaves my lungs in a whoosh as I crash against him. I feel his arms come around my back to keep me from sliding to the ground.

“Whoa,” Ollie breathes out.

My thoughts flash to getting away, but Milo’s palm connects with the bare skin on the small of my back as he keeps me locked against his chest. My body goes limp in his arms.

“Don’t let her go,” Ares warns, moving to stand behind Milo so he’s now blocking the door, just in case I was able to get free from Milo.

“I’m not, she’s not fighting me.”

Ollie’s face comes into view, his green eyes studying mine. “Hey, Muenster,” he says hesitantly.

“Don’t move your hand, Milo,” I order urgently. His body goes even more rigid if that’s even possible.

I’m so close, I hear when he swallows. “Okay,” he agrees.

Ares takes a step in our direction, his eyes narrowed on me. “There you are.” His relief is so obvious, he almost sighs.

I lick my dry lips and nod. “My mind cleared when Milo’s hand touched my skin.” My voice is a little hoarse from shouting.

Dante rushes out the door, not looking back. I scan my thoughts to see if I said or did something to hurt him. I did lunge at him; could that be it?

Dante returns with a bottle of water in his hands. He’s already cracking the lid off and tipping it to my lips before I can even respond. A little dribbles down my chin before I catch on and swallow the water.

I stare into his eyes as he holds the bottle to my lips. I tip my chin—pushing the bottle up with my mouth so he knows I’m done—to keep it from spilling all over Milo, more than it already has anyway.

“Better?” Dante asks, his eyes soft as he watches me.

I nod. “Thank you.” After clearing my throat again, I say, “You could probably put me down now, Milo.” When I feel his arms loosen, I rush to add, “Just make sure your hand stays touching me.”

He bends his knees until my feet hit the ground. I actually feel the carpet under my toes. I wiggle my feet. God, you don’t realize how much you miss something until it’s gone.

“Why are you so white? Is it coming back?” Ollie looks over at Ares like he has the answers.

“I’m fine, just a little dazed.” I lean my forehead against Milo’s wide chest. It’s like sensory overload. I can feel the cool air from the ceiling fan in the other room blowing across my skin, causing gooseflesh to dance across my arms. Milo’s calloused hand strokes higher up my back and under my shirt. I shiver in response. Now is not the time to be entranced with his touch.

“Are you ready to talk about it?” Ollie inquires, slowly encroaching into our space. I turn my face, keeping my forehead buried against Milo.

“Yeah, I guess, but I’m not ready to experience that again, so I’m not

letting him go.”

“That’s fine, *Cara*, if you need a few minutes... I understand.” Ares makes eye contact with me. I see it then, the wildness in his eyes. He knows exactly what that cost me, the total loss of control. It must have been ten times worse for him.

“Let’s go upstairs.” Dante looks around like he doesn’t want to be in here anymore. Milo wraps his arms around me and lifts my feet right off the floor. I let out a small surprised sound as he turns and flees the closet, as if he feels the exact same way. I wrap my legs around his waist to make it easier to walk, and with my arms pinned to my sides, I just manage to cling to his shirt.

He takes the steps two at a time, almost jumping up as we go. Once we’re in the room, he turns and plops himself on the low bed, never once losing the connection with my skin.

A flush steals over my face as I bounce down on his lap. Our eyes meet, it seems the movement surprised both of us. Milo’s fingers dig into my back as he drags me closer.

“Are we sure it’s gone?” I look over to find Ollie pacing at the end of the bed. His eyes flick up to Milo and me then back away.

“I’m sure, Ollie. I don’t know if it would come back if Milo weren’t touching me, but it’s gone for now,” I assure him.

“How will we know when it’s completely gone?” he asks, posing the question to the others and not looking at me.

I answer anyway. “We could test it in a little bit. I’m not ready yet, but now that we know Milo’s touch makes it go away, we’ll know what to do if it’s still affecting me.”

Dante takes the seat next to me, then lifts my hand to his mouth and places a soft kiss against the back of my palm. “We’re never doing anything like that again,” he declares, his eyes still locked on mine. His voice is barely more than a growl.

“Agreed,” Milo rushes out.

Ares is standing near the door, like he doesn’t want to get too close to me just yet. He probably blames himself for letting me touch the stupid box. I shudder even thinking about it.

Milo’s hold tightens. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to see a pizza box again,” he mutters.

“Shit,” Dante curses.

I tuck myself closer to Milo. I'm straddling his waist and my head is tucked under his chin. I feel safe, protected. Removed from what happened in the closet. With my eyes locked on Ares, I begin to tell them what it felt like to be consumed with Leon's influence.

"I actually felt it." I lift my arms to see if there's any evidence of his taint left behind. "I could feel it moving through me, and there wasn't anything I could do to stop it." Ares takes a step closer, his face pinched in worry.

"But then, those thoughts were gone, and I was left feeling..." I stumble, looking for the right words. "So very angry."

"About what?" Dante squeezes my hand, reminding me he's still holding it.

"I don't know, I think that's why I was so confused." I shake my head, thinking back. "I felt alone, invisible, like I was a freak." I look away from Ares, feeling ashamed. "It felt like it was you guys' fault. I was pissed off at you guys," I confess reluctantly.

I feel the bed dip and Ares takes the seat next to Milo. I still can't bring myself to look at any of them. My mom said it couldn't make you feel or do something that wasn't part of you. Does that mean I really feel that way?

I dismiss the thoughts. There is no way I feel that way. I'm overjoyed to be with them, even if it makes me a freak. Finally looking up, I see Ares's patient eyes waiting for me.

"It's okay, Muenster, we know it's not how you really feel." I give Ollie a small, grateful smile.

"Where were you trying to go? You mentioned Leon, something changed in your expression, and then you tried to leave." Ares watches me, waiting for my reply.

I don't even know if I can explain this right. "It was like... like I wanted to be angry at you guys, but something kept breaking through. It felt wrong, but when you said something about the box..." I take a deep breath. "It was like I remembered Leon, and then all the rage had real emotion behind it. I don't know if I would have stopped trying to get to him if Milo hadn't touched my skin."

"Did you have a destination in mind?" Ollie's brows are furrowed.

"Not that I know of; it felt like I could find him, or maybe it was just determination. I don't know. But... I wanted to hurt him," I admit.

"Join the club." Ollie throws himself on the end of the bed.

CHAPTER 13

“We didn’t even learn anything.” Milo lobs an empty water bottle across the room to land in the garbage bin.

“Well, we can assume his goal was just to make us fight.” Ollie shrugs, looking around for confirmation.

“That doesn’t even make sense, what would that accomplish? The influence lasted twenty, thirty minutes tops?” Dante is leaning his rump against the counter with an apple poised near his mouth, waiting for him to take a bite.

“I don’t think he understands a real Infinity.” Ares tugs at the bottom of his vest to straighten it.

“What do you mean?” Milo asks.

“Exactly what I said. Nothing else really makes sense. If he understood how a real Infinity worked, he’d know that once his influence expired, so would the anger.”

“Do Infinities ever fight? Get...divorced?” I fumble, looking for the right words.

“Fight, sure. Separate, not that I know of.” Ollie looks over at Ares.

He sighs. “It happens—not often—but everyone faces challenges. And everyone deals with them differently. It never usually lasts though,” Ares explains.

“Wow. Let’s never be those idiots.” Ollie shakes his head like the thought alone is ridiculous.

“We won’t,” Milo confirms, moving on quickly. “Do you really think he could be that far gone that he doesn’t even understand the basic concept of Infinities? Are we sure there isn’t something we’re missing?”

I blow out a breath, wishing I could be more helpful. “I don’t know. I don’t know if I was pissed at you guys because you were the target, or if I was pissed at you because you were available. I *do* know that once the emotion locked on to Leon, someone I’m actually mad at, it was like putting fuel on a fire.”

After a short period of silence, I stand up from the lawn chair and stretch. I feel all their eyes on me. “I think I’m going to take a bath.”

“In that tiny tub?” Milo’s brow is furrowed.

“It’s a normal-size tub, Milo, you’re just jumbo size,” I tell him, already heading upstairs to grab some clothes.

“I’m not jumbo size,” I hear him mumble. I can just imagine his pouty face as he looks at the others for confirmation.

A small laugh escapes me as I push into the bedroom. I make my way over to the box labeled with my name and lift the lid off. We haven’t brought over much besides our personal stuff and clothing.

It’s easy to find a pair of sleep shorts and a t-shirt. I don’t even bother with a bra. Sleeping with a bra on is damn uncomfortable, and we’re past that point anyway. It’s not like they haven’t seen me without one.

Opening the door to the bathroom across the hall, I hear the voices of the guys downstairs, and it’s comforting to know they’re so close. I don’t bother closing the door completely.

After placing my clean clothes on the sink, I start the water, and it drowns out any noise from the guys below. I haven’t had a bath in ages, not since I was little when Mom got us a nicer hotel for the week. I look down, wondering if I overestimated how well I was going to fit in the tub. Maybe Milo was right.

Not willing to give up, I strip off my clothes and dip my toe in the steamy water. I hiss out a breath but continue until I’m as fully submerged as I’ll get. My knees are sticking out of the water because the tub is too short, but the rest of me is submerged to my neck. It takes a few minutes to adjust to the hot water, but finally I relax, letting the heat and steam soak into my body.

My eyes pop open. “Oh my God!” I sit up and hear thundering up the stairs. Dante’s chest is heaving when he throws open the door.

Dante searches the small room, his eyes landing quickly back on me. I see Ares behind his shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“I can still feel.” I reach down and splash my hands in the water. A stupid giggle erupts from me when the water splashes my face.

Dante's shoulders fall and a smile lights up his face. Ares pushes forward to stand next to his brother. His eyes are smoldering as he gazes at me. I lift my arms and cover my chest. The heat from the tub already has me hot, but a flush from another kind of heat ignites inside me.

"What's going on?" Ollie leans around Ares's shoulder, his mouth popping open when he sees me. "I like bath time. I'm a dirty, dirty boy."

"Shut up." Dante reaches over and swats him on the shoulder.

I see the top of Milo's head as he peeks around Dante's shoulder, his cheeks are pink, but he bites his bottom lip, not looking away.

"You guys can go now," I urge.

"What do you mean, you can feel now?" Milo angles his way closer.

My stomach drops. "Let her finish her bath, then we can talk about it." Ares's voice is cajoling as he turns away from me. The others follow, but he's the last to leave the doorway, his eyes raking over my heated skin, leaving the promise of more in their wake. He doesn't even bother to partially close the door.

"You're letting all the heat out." I pout and slide back into the water, but a smile blossoms on my lips. I can actually feel the water moving around me. I lift my back and ride the tiny waves making me float.

I'll never take touch for granted again. Just as quickly my happiness evaporates. I'm going to have to tell Milo and Ollie now, neither of them is going to like that I kept this from them. I slide down until the water is covering my head. The slight pressure in my ears builds the longer I hold my breath, but I stay under for a few seconds longer. When I shoot up out of the water, I'm gasping. But I can't fight the grin tugging at my lips as I feel the rivulets of water running down from my face and hair. They won't be that mad. Hopefully.



"I CAN'T BELIEVE you didn't tell us!" Ollie barks. He looks over at Ares and Dante, his eyes narrowing. "You should have said something." He directs his anger at them instead of me.

Milo still hasn't said a word. After getting out of the tub and getting dressed, I found all four guys in the bedroom. Ollie and Milo were on the bed, while Ares and Dante were on the other side of the room in some sort of

standoff. I knew I needed to take responsibility immediately and tell them the truth.

“I asked them not to say anything—made them promise,” I tell Ollie. He folds his arms over his chest and mumbles under his breath.

“Why?” Milo’s voice cracks, so he clears his throat.

I reach for his hand, but he pulls away from me. A splinter of hurt lashes at me, but I really don’t have the right to be angry this time. I kept it from him because I was trying to protect him, but I’m a fucking hypocrite, because I’ve been mad at all of them and my mother for doing the exact same thing to me.

Sniffing a little to hide the hurt, I admit, “It doesn’t matter why, I shouldn’t have done it.”

“You’re damn right,” Ollie grumbles. “Why did they get to know?” He gestures to Ares and Dante.

“Ares knows because he’s Ares.” I widen my hands. “And Dante heard Ares telling me that I should tell Milo about what happened.”

“Just Milo?” Ollie sounds hurt again.

“No, both of you, but he knew I should have talked to Milo first.”

Another round of grumbles from Ollie. He glares at me, but I can’t even hold his stare.

“That’s enough, Ollie.” Milo sounds defeated. “I know why you didn’t say anything, Laura.”

“Yeah, because she thought you would close yourself off again,” Ollie fires back. I glance over at him, concerned that he’s the one so upset. I thought Milo would take it harder.

“No, it’s fine. He’s entitled to be mad.” I look down at the mattress. “I wasn’t going to keep it from you guys forever. I just wanted a little time, and Ares suspected that it was only temporary, that I could learn to control it,” I confess, feeling guilty for bringing Ares up again.

“How do we make sure it doesn’t happen again?” Milo is looking to Ares for guidance.

“I don’t think we need to worry about it happening again. I think we need to figure out how to train her to use it.”

Milo’s head snaps back like he can’t believe what he’s hearing. “Why would you say that?”

“Because, it didn’t just stop her from feeling, Milo. It changed her skin, just like you guessed. She wouldn’t get hurt if she were in an accident.” Ares

pauses. “No one else could hurt her if they tried,” he finishes his voice low, like he doesn’t want to admit his thoughts went there.

Milo’s eyes flash to mine. “That’s true?”

I nod eagerly. “I slammed my hand in the door and it was totally fine.” Milo blinks at me. “I didn’t do it on purpose,” I rush to add.

Milo bites his lip, looking unsure. I lift my hand to reach for him again. He flicks his eyes to my hand but doesn’t stop me from laying my palm over his forearm. I let out a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry, Milo.” I turn to include Ollie. “You too, Ollie, I shouldn’t have kept this from you guys.”

Ollie turns his face away from me. I don’t think my apology did much to soften him. I decide that I’ll talk to Ollie privately later, so I focus on Milo. “Just so you know, Milo, even if I could never feel anything but you guys again, it would be totally worth it. I would trade just about anything if it meant I had you—all of you.” I let him see the truth in my eyes before looking around, so they all know they’re included.

“Don’t talk like that, you shouldn’t have to give up anything for us,” Ollie adds, disgruntled.

I fight the smile trying to form on my lips, thinking maybe he’s not so far from forgiving me after all.

“We need to start working on your training again. I know things have been crazy, but now we have a full set of abilities we need to get under control.” Ares places his ankle over his knee, getting more comfortable. He looks a little out of place in his nice clothes, sitting in a lawn chair in our mostly empty bedroom.

“Might be a good idea if we all worked on our abilities. I know I’ve been dealing with a few changes since Laura.” Milo’s cheeks tinge pink. “Especially since we bonded.”

“You’re right,” Ares agrees.

Inwardly, I groan. Great, instead of just figuring out how not to zap the electricity and turn into a walking nightmare, I’ll need to make sure I don’t go all beastly and lose the sensation of touch too. No pressure.

CHAPTER 14

“*H*ey, what are you doing?” I look over my shoulder to see Ollie lurking in the doorway to the bedroom. He’s not wearing his usual smile.

I’m lying on my tummy looking at the laptop, so I roll onto my side so I can see him better. “Just checking Google classroom. What about you?”

Ollie leans his shoulder against the door. “I told Milo I had to shit, just so he’d let me out of the basement. Remind me never to work for him.”

A snort of laughter bubbles out of me. His lip tips up, but he quickly smothers his grin. He’s still mad at me from last night.

I pat the bed next to me. “Come on and take a break. I’ll tell him you’re helping me with my homework if he comes looking.”

Ollie bites the corner of his lip and I can see the indecision written on his face. He wants to come over, but he’s not going to give in so easily. I reach for the side table and produce the remote to his gaming system. “You can keep me company while I finish up.” I offer him the controller to sweeten the deal.

He drops his arms to the side and huffs, but comes over anyway with a tiny smile on his lips. I think Ollie just wants me to think he’s still upset.

I roll back onto my tummy and bring the computer to life by touching the track pad. I let him get comfortable, resting against the wall with his legs stretched out on the bed, before I reach over and run my finger from his ankle up behind his knee.

He takes his eyes off the TV and glares at me, but he’s not serious. I can see it in the gleam in his green eyes and in the way the corner of his lip keeps twitching.

“I’m still mad at you,” he declares, his nose tipped into the air.

I push the laptop over and inch closer to him. “You are? I would have never guessed.” I make my eyes all wide and innocent as I peer up at him.

That makes him sneer, “Don’t you try that pouty face with me, Muenster. I know what you’re up to.”

“You do? What’s that?” I get a little closer.

“You’re trying to butter me up so I’ll forgive you. And you’re cheating with that gorgeous face, looking at me like that.”

“I think you already forgave me, Ollie.” I’m close enough now that I can see the little flecks of darker green in his eyes. “You know I didn’t keep it from you to hurt you.”

His eyes narrow a bit. “Yeah, but it did.” His voice is serious. Maybe I misjudged him, maybe he really is still mad at me. He lets out a heavy sigh. “But... me and Milo did the same thing to you when we weren’t completely honest about our feelings for each other,” he concedes reluctantly, fiddling with the gaming remote in his hands.

I move to get my legs under me, sitting with my knees butterflied out right in front of him. “We could both choose to learn from this and work harder to trust each other’s reactions.” I’m trying to figure out how to be in a real relationship, one that involves five of us. We’re all bound to make mistakes along the way.

“We could do that,” he replies, all light and airy, “but I think you need to grovel a little bit more.”

My mouth drops open in outrage. I reach for him and dig my fingers in his side. Here I was all serious and worried he was still mad at me, and he’s making fun of me. “Oliver!” I scold, leaning on him to keep him trapped while I tickle his sides. “You’re a mean, mean boy!”

He lets out a bark of laughter, his eyes dancing as I wrestle his hands down so I can torture him with my tickling fingers.

I get winded much quicker than he does, since he’s so much stronger than I. When he turns the tables, I think I have an advantage for a second. I try to connect to the ability Milo gave me, but I immediately realize the kink in my logic. I can always feel the guys’ touches, no matter how small.

“Mercy,” I call out, as soon as his fingers get close to my armpits. I’m rolled up in a ball, half on him, trying to keep my arms as tight as possible to my sides while his fingers are inching ever closer. “I... give... up!” I pant through my laughter.

Ollie's fingers make it all the way to my armpits before I let out a girlish squeal. He pauses. "What do I get if I stop?"

"I'll do your laundry," I say, and it's the first thing that pops into my head. He blows out a raspberry and tickles me a bit more. "I'll... I'll..." My mind goes completely blank. I can't even think of one thing to offer him.

"Nothing? I see how it is." Ollie curls around me tighter and digs in.

"I'm going... to pee... on the... bed."

"You tried that last time. I'm not falling for your tricks that easily."

"Whatever you... want." I laugh, but I think I might actually be in danger of emptying my bladder.

He freezes. "Oh, now that's an idea with merit. Anything?"

I suck in a few deep breaths. "Anything," I confirm. He moves his fingers and lets out a deep belly laugh. I know I'm in for it the moment I hear the sound.



I GRUMBLE the entire time I'm walking down the stairs. "I can't believe I agreed to this." I cut my gaze to Ollie. "This is blackmail and you know it." I fold my arms over my stomach, but it just pushes my boobs up higher, so I lower my arms to my sides.

"You said anything," Ollie reminds me.

"Yeah, clearly this was the last thing I thought you would ask for." I gesture to my nearly naked body. "Where did you even get this? I swear to God, Ollie, if this is some other girl's... I'll..." I don't even finish the threat.

"I got it for you, silly girl." Ollie doesn't even look like he feels bad. On the contrary, he looks ecstatic. When we reach the bottom of the stairs, he turns me to face him, clasping my shoulders. "Shush, or they'll come before we're ready." When I open my mouth again, he hushes me.

I glare up at him, vowing to get even, even if it means I have to use one of the others to help me.

He must see something cross my face because he sobers up. "Laura, I would never ask you to do something you really weren't comfortable with." He studies my face.

Of course I'm not comfortable. "I made a deal. I keep my word," I state. I know I really don't have to do this, but that would be like admitting defeat,

twice. No, I can suffer a little embarrassment if it means I get the last word with Ollie on this. But I'm still going to get him back. Plus, Ares will know right away this wasn't my idea.

Looking a little more hesitant, he mutters, "Okay, if you're sure it's all right?"

I jerk my head in a nod. "Where is he?"

"The kitchen, last I saw."

I turn away from Ollie and straighten my shoulders. I can do this. I walk toward the kitchen. Sure enough, Ares is at a small card table with his laptop open. He doesn't even look up when I enter. "Ares," I call out, my voice a little high-pitched.

"Hmmm," he hums, still not looking up. I fidget and look behind me. Ollie is just out of Ares's view. He does a shooing motion with his hands, telling me to get on with it. I can't believe I'm about to say this. I reach behind my back and tug at the string hanging there. "Um, could you help me, please?" My face is probably as red as the damn bikini I'm barely wearing.

"What do you need, *Cara*?" He's completely distracted with whatever he's doing on the computer. I step a little closer, so he won't be able to miss my bare legs.

"Could you tie this for me? Ollie said you're putting in a pool and I wanted to make sure it fit." The words race from my lips. I'm not even sure I took a breath.

Ares's brows furrow. "I didn't say..." His words die off as he finally looks up.

My face flushes even hotter. His eyes travel from the tips of my toes and slowly up my legs. He swallows when his eyes reach my bikini bottoms. Before he can look any higher, I spin around and show him my back, holding the top in place. I hear the noise of the chair being shoved back then his heat is right behind me and it's all I can feel.

I look up to see Ollie giving me two thumbs up and disappearing from the doorway. Ares told me he fights dirty, but he doesn't have anything on Ollie.

Ares clicks his tongue. "Foolish boy," he mutters. I look over my shoulder. Ares's eyes are fully black as he stares down at my body. "He sent you out here like this to me, when he could have kept you to himself?" Ares bites his lip, his eyes finding mine.

"Damn it!" I hear Ollie curse from the hallway.

I feel Ares's hand touch my back, but it's not to tie the strings of my top.

No, it's a deliberate caress. Heat pools in my lower belly.

"Pity for him," Ares whispers. It's my turn to swallow, my mouth is suddenly dry. "And very shortsighted, I might add." Ares traces his fingers over the crest of my shoulder and down my arm. A wake of gooseflesh follows. He clicks his tongue again. "Now it seems he's left you cold."

Cold is the last thing I am, but I don't argue with his assessment. "Well, let's see what we can do about that." His fingertips brush back up my arm and wrap around my neck from behind. He steps even closer, bringing his body flush with mine.

I lean back into him, letting my head fall back to his chest. Ares makes a sound of satisfaction. "When you see Oliver, tell him he can have the pool." I can hear the smile on his lips as he whispers in my ear.

"Would you come somewhere with me?" Ares's lips brush against my earlobe. I nod, not even needing to know where.

Cool air coils around us. Ares wraps his other hand around my waist and holds me against him tightly. "Hold on, Laura." I fold my arms over his and close my eyes. I know without him telling me that he's going to shadow walk and take me with him.

Even with my eyes closed, I know when the darkness surrounds us. Seconds later, with a slightly queasy stomach, I open my eyes and see the apartment above the garage where I first found out who I really was.

It's dark and quiet, I can hear my own breath mingling with Ares's. He doesn't bother with any lights, he doesn't even release me. "I've missed you," he murmurs. Even though we haven't really been apart, except for the night Ollie and I drove to Florida, I feel exactly the same way.

"I've missed you too. You've been distant. I don't like it," I reply, but it doesn't make me feel weak, I love that I can admit how much I need him.

Ares's fingers tighten a fraction, forcing my head to tip back further against him. He breathes against my neck. "I cherish the fact you need me just as much as I need you."

I jerk my head in response, unable to form words. His free hand tugs at the string behind my neck and the red top falls to the floor. "This okay?"

I swallow and force myself to speak, I know he won't go any further unless I do. "Yes."

Ares inhales and releases my throat. I spin around and push myself into his space. His lips are parted as he stares down at me. I wrap my arms up and around his neck, leaning up on my toes to close the distance between us. He

meets me halfway, his lips finding mine roughly. His kisses are hot and hard as he drags me closer to him. Meeting his need head-on, I kiss him back just as eagerly.

My fingers go to the buttons on his vest, fumbling to get them open. I break the kiss when I can't focus enough. Ares doesn't miss a beat, moving his mouth to my neck and ear as I start on his shirt after the vest is open.

He walks me backward until the back of my legs hit the tall bed in the corner. "Climb up," Ares orders, pushing my hands away from his shirt to remove the rest of it himself.

I sit and scoot back, the small bikini bottoms almost sliding off as I do. I don't know if I should thank Ollie or curse him. I look like a fool with them rolling down my butt and thighs.

Reaching up, Ares grabs the fabric as I lift my butt off the mattress and tugs them down the rest of the way. He stands back, the red material still clenched in his hand, and stares at me.

"I moved out here when I got my mark." He licks over his bottom lip. "I was so confident I'd find you quickly."

I rest my hands behind me on the bed. Ares's head tilts. "I don't know how many nights I lay awake in this bed thinking about you being next to me." His eyes close. "What you would smell like, feel like...taste like." His voice is husky, a promise of things to come.

Ares lowers his head and kneels on the bed, inching closer to me with every intent of learning the answers to his questions. All that intensity focused on me is a little overwhelming, but damn if I'm not lucky to be his.

"That first night I found you in here, I could hardly believe you were real." He prowls closer until he's leaning over me. His pants are still on, but his shirt and vest are gone. "But then you opened these beautiful lips." Ares's eyes close again as he places his lips over mine. "And I was lost." He breathes against my mouth before dipping in to deliver a slow-as-sin kiss.

I reach up and run my palms over his shoulders and back, and he lowers his body to fit between my thighs. A breathy sigh leaves my lips when our bodies connect. Ares slips his tongue in my mouth as he rocks his lower body against mine.

A thrill of excitement has me pulling him to me tighter, he's already hard. I can feel the soft texture of his pants against me, but I want to feel what's under them. "Take off your pants," I pant into his ear after breaking the kiss.

His left hand goes under my bottom to lift me as he grinds against me.

Ares groans at the friction. “I’ve been waiting to have you here for a long time.” He nips the side of my neck. “Don’t rush me.”

My head falls back against the pillow. Ares uses his body to cage mine in, looming over me as he rises into a push-up. My mouth goes dry when I see the way his shoulders bunch. Glancing down, I watch the way his abdominal muscles tighten and roll as he rocks against me, until I can feel every inch of him nestled between my thighs.

Lowering his head, he buries his face in my throat and pushes one of his arms under the back of my neck. He flattens himself against me, and my breath gets stolen from my lungs as he tightens his grip.

I have just enough air to force out short little breaths, but damn, I don’t even care. His weight, his body on mine, is so fucking worth it. Ares groans against my ear; it’s a purely masculine sound. In a quick movement, he thrusts his knee out to the side, forcing my legs to open wider. I run my hands down his back, my short nails tracing over the tautness of his muscles until I can feel the waistband of his pants. He’s still rocking against me, enough to make me crazy with need, but not enough to alleviate the pressure building inside me. I need him. All of him.

Just when I have my hands full of his ass, he inches down my body, leaving the arm that was behind my head to trail after him. His mouth moves down to my breasts as he kisses and licks his way to my nipple, but that other hand goes right to my neck. The moment I think to draw in a deep breath, his fingers circle the column of my throat. A shaky gasp falls from my lips instead.

I miss the feel of him pressed against my center, but his mouth on my nipple almost makes it worth it. My back arches off the bed, making his grip on my neck even tighter. My thoughts are already hazy and becoming even more of a blur. All I can think of and feel is him.

His grasp lessens and I pull in greedy breaths. Ares takes a heavy pull against my nipple, then releases me from his mouth, only to seal his lips over mine. He’s panting just as hard as I am. His body lines up with mine again, and I melt into the mattress. I didn’t even realize how tightly my body was coiled until that moment.

Ares nips at my bottom lip, nibbling. Then his teeth are on my jaw, my chin as he moves back down my curves, never letting me fully adjust to his body on mine. A small sound of protest hums from my throat.

He ignores it and kisses his way past my breasts, past my belly button,

until his face is almost between my legs. He looks up at me then, his eyes fully black, fringed with inky lashes. He could be terrifying, but never to me. Ares's soul spoke to mine the first moment I saw him. No matter how dark he may look, his heart is pure, and all mine.

He inhales, his chest expanding. Ares places my leg over his shoulder so my heel is in the center of his back, and slides his palm under my butt. His other hand snakes down the center of my body, stopping between my belly button and my pubic bone.

I lift up on my elbows so I can see him better; a tic flickers along his jaw. Keeping direct eye contact with me, he lifts my ass in his palm and slides his warm, wet tongue up my center. I fall back on the bed just as overwhelmed as the first time he did this. Every muscle in my body freezes, waiting for another swipe of that devilish tongue.

A low moan releases from my chest when his hand tightens on my ass, I know what's coming. There is only his mouth, his tongue; every other thought is obliterated from my head. The leg of my foot still against the mattress is shaking. I didn't even realize I was pushing myself up to meet his lips, my thigh muscle is burning from the effort, but not enough to make me stop.

Ares makes a noise close to a growl and jerks me higher so the only thing touching the mattress is my back. I feel his fingers sliding along my backside. My body goes rigid when I feel his finger trace down the crack of my ass. He pauses mid-lick and gazes down at me; his eyes are heavily lidded, but they don't hide the sparks of white dancing in the depths. I watch and feel as his tongue circles my clit, and any thought of where his hand is evaporates when he sucks that small bundle of nerves into his mouth.

I can't even keep my eyes open. My body is strung tighter than a guitar string, and I'm on the edge of a precipice. His tongue flicks over me, and I'm gone. I cry out loud enough that I shove my own palm over my mouth to keep from alerting anyone that we're here.

My body jerks embarrassingly hard, as he continues to lap at me. With every muscle now loose and pliant, Ares lowers me to the bed. I open my eyes to find him prowling over me, his lips wet. I grow flustered—what he did and how he made me feel was amazing, but now that the evidence is on his face, I'm a little embarrassed.

Ares brings his hand up to his face. I watch in fascination as he wipes his lips, but his tongue darts between his fingers like he can't get enough. If my

face weren't already flaming with heat and lust, it would be now.

Without an ounce of reservation, Ares slams his mouth to mine, the taut line of his body rolling into place on top of me. The fabric of his pants and belt buckle feel harsh against my overly sensitive skin. I meet his kiss with a fervor all my own. I slide my hands into his hair and hold on as he steals what little breath I have left.

"I want inside you," he begs, with a sinful roll of his hips, a promise of what's to come.

"Do you have protection?"

Ares's forehead lands on mine as he exhales a heavy breath. "I have to check the dresser."

I don't want to think about why there would already be condoms here, and whom they would be for. But a flash of hurt and insecurity plays through my mind. Sensing the shift in my mood, Ares leans back and meets my gaze.

"We don't have to," he says, with no sign that he would be upset about stopping now. He's off base about my hesitance.

"No, I want to, want you. It's just... I don't know, it's kinda weird." Ares's head jerks back a little bit. I rush to add, "I mean the whole condom thing. I know I shouldn't worry about what happened before, but it's there and I can't help but think about it."

Ares relaxes against me again, holding most of his weight on his hands. "We can talk about it if you want," he offers with a small wince.

"No!" I almost shout. I'm sure he can see the abject horror on my face. I scoot away from him until my back hits the headboard of the bed.

"I didn't necessarily mean right now, I just meant..." Ares looks down at my legs, not meeting my eyes. "I want you to know you could. I'm not talking about details, Laura. I'm talking about making sure you're comfortable with my sexual history."

"Well, I'm fucking not." I cross my arms over my breasts, wondering how the hell this went off the rails so quickly.

"I can't change what I've done. Even if I wanted to." Ares maneuvers himself into a seated position in front of me.

I'm aggravated at myself for even thinking about this, why couldn't he have just had the condom in his pocket? Now, we turned something that was amazing into something awkward and uncomfortable for both of us.

Some of the hurt I'm feeling just thinking about them with someone else morphs into anger. "Why were you guys even with other girls? It's not like

you didn't know you had a match." I haven't really let myself wander down this road. I thought I had accepted the fact that they had lives before me, but this reminder just shows how much it really does bother me.

"You should probably get dressed." Ares slides off the bed and scoops my bottoms off the floor.

Oh wow, those four words cut to the quick of my soul. I don't even know why, but it feels like he's rejecting me. I roll my lips in and bite them, keeping my face a mask to hide the hurt. I reach for the blanket and cover myself before he can even toss the swimsuit on the bed for me.

I can't even look up at him. In my peripheral vision, I see him head to the bathroom. He closes the door behind himself with a gentle click, and my heart shatters.

CHAPTER 15

A stupid tear leaks out of my eye while I'm struggling to get dressed before he can get out of the bathroom. I hear the water turn on as I'm dragging my hair out of the back of my borrowed t-shirt. I rush away from the bed, wishing it weren't in the same room. I'd really like some distance from it right now.

The door opens silently, but his presence fills the room like no sound could. I try to ignore him, but I sneak a quick glance in his direction. He's still shirtless, and there are a few drops of water on his neck and chest like he rinsed his face. Another bolt of turmoil flashes through my gut. It's not like I wasn't expecting him to wash his face after what he just did, but it almost feels like a slap to the face for him to do it right now.

I look away. I sense and hear him moving around behind me. Eventually, he walks over to the living room area where I'm standing. I take two quick steps to the left when I know he's close.

He makes a sound, something between a gasp of surprise and hum of hurt. I can't look at him, not right now. I'm too upset and frustrated to even understand what he's thinking or feeling. I guess this bond thing isn't perfect after all.

"Can we sit for a minute?" He sounds unsure, hesitant.

I don't know what to do. I don't want to go home yet, since the others would know something was wrong. If I have to talk about this, I'd rather do it with one of them instead of all of them. Except Milo. I don't have to worry about Milo.

A sense of guilt quickly falls over me. Milo has been surrounded by people for years, but he was afraid to get too close. Our situations are similar,

even if our reasons are very different.

Is that what I really want for them? To have felt utterly alone, like I've felt for most of my life. No, it's not. But then, why do I feel this raw pain when I think about them experiencing love with someone else? Especially when they have to share me. At least I know now I'll never have to share their affection, love, and desire.

My mind is so fucked up. I shake my head in denial, trying to rid myself of the thoughts. "You don't want to sit, to talk?" Ares's voice is edged in panic.

"No, we can talk," I croak, realizing he thought I was answering his question. When I turn to take a seat on the sofa, I see his shirt is back on, but most of the buttons are still undone.

The black leather is cool as I ease myself onto the sofa cushions. I can feel how tight my shoulders are as I gather the edge of my shirt in my hand.

Ares forgoes the couch to sit on the coffee table across from me. It tickles my memory of the first time we met. He's nothing like the arrogant man he was that night. Instead, he looks guilty, and he won't meet my eyes, even though the position he put himself in makes me think he wanted to.

I cross my legs and tug the stretchy fabric of the shirt I took from the closet over my knees. I feel so exposed right now.

After a few tense seconds of silence, Ares brings his hands up and grips the sides of his lowered head, tugging at his hair. "So..." Ares scrubs his face with his hands. "We grew up knowing what we are, that we would more than likely find our Synergist when we turned sixteen."

"You're giving me a history lesson?" I interject.

Ares's face pinches as he furrows his brow. "I'm just trying to explain."

"And that involves you reminding me how I was clueless. Mmkay."

"No, Laura, I'm trying to explain how fucking stupid I was—even though it's not an excuse," he adds, emphasizing the end.

I inch backwards a little into the couch, my hands still folded over my legs. "Don't let me stop you then."

"Well, you see..." he pauses, then finally opens his mouth, only to snap it closed. "I can't even think of a way to say this without it coming out as fucked up as it really is." Ares whips his head toward the window, his lips in a thin hard line.

"Just say it. It's obviously something you think is important." Reaching over, I snag one of the dark blue pillows from the corner and lay it over my

lap.

“Not very many people wait until they meet their match before fooling around,” Ares says quickly. He lets out a little raspberry afterwards, like he surprised himself.

I tug the pillow closer. “So, you’re saying I’m weird because I didn’t go out and bang every boy I could?” My tone is defensive and defiant.

Ares’s head jerks back to me and our eyes finally meet. “No, that’s not at all what I’m saying,” he grits out through his teeth.

“Then spit it out, because that’s what it sounds like to me.”

Ares’s shoulders slump, a frown marring his face. “Goddamn. This is the last fucking thing I want to think about.” He scrubs his hand over his face again.

I snort. “You’re the one who offered,” I remind him sassily.

Ares closes his eyes. “I was fourteen,” he confesses. “I was young and stupid and didn’t have any concept of what this would mean to me,” he waves his hand between us, “other than I would have to spend the rest of my life with one woman.”

I suck in a breath. It’s like he’s confirming my insecurity.

His eyes finally open. Ares licks his bottom lip quickly, preparing to speak. “If I could take it back, I would. Every single touch. But I can’t, and I can’t even use age and stupidly as an excuse. As I got older, I watched my friends find their Infinities, and I still didn’t understand what I was stealing from you, but I knew it was wrong. I didn’t understand how deeply I would regret it, but it’s not an excuse.”

A hollow feeling settles in my stomach. I hurt for me and for him, because it’s as plain as his gorgeous face that he’s hurting with me. A hush falls over us. I’m not feeling nearly as snarky, but I’m still upset. To top it off, I actually feel guilty for feeling upset. Being a girl sucks sometimes. I bet guys don’t torture themselves over their conflicting emotions.

Eventually, I break the silence. “I don’t really understand it. I’m trying not to form opinions, because if I had been in your shoes, maybe things would have been different for me too. But I’ve never felt the desire to love someone else—”

“Wait, stop,” Ares interrupts, lifting his hand in the air. “I’ve never loved anyone. Never,” he states vehemently.

“But you’ve been with other people? Made love,” I address him slowly, but he’s already shaking his head in denial.

“Had sex, yes. Nothing else.” He widens his hands in surrender.

“That makes even less sense, why would you have sex with someone you don’t love?”

“Holy fuck.” Ares sighs and looks up at the ceiling. “If only it were that simple.” He meets my eyes. “One doesn’t equal the other, Laura. I understand where you’re coming from. I respect the hell out of you for feeling that way. But in reality, that’s not how everyone feels, and it shouldn’t be. Sex can just be sex.”

I clench my teeth together, tightening my jaw. I’m really confused. Is he validating what he did, or apologizing for it? “But you said you would take it back if you could?”

“And I would, but that doesn’t mean waiting is the right option for everyone.”

“Why not?” I know I’m being stubborn. I know waiting for marriage, or your match, isn’t realistic. Hell, kids were screwing in the band room at school in seventh grade and they probably didn’t love each other, not really, even if they thought they did. “Oh, forget it,” I say, before he can answer. “I know the difference. I get that people have sex in and out of love, but I just don’t like thinking about you guys doing it, okay? I couldn’t, and maybe that makes me the weird one, but I think you should love someone before you give yourself to them.” I’m being defensive again, even though he’s not doing or saying anything I would have to argue against.

Before he can say anything more, I continue, “I don’t think I’m ready to talk about this. I knew you weren’t a virgin; let’s just leave it at that.” I throw myself back into the cushions, clinging to the pillow over my chest. I’m still aggravated, but I don’t think there’s a way to end this conversation where I won’t be.

I turn and stare out the window. I have a lot of other things I need to be worrying about—like eliminating Leon and making sure my mom is okay—things I can actually do something about. I *don’t* need to worry about stuff like Ares and how many girls he’s screwed, there’s absolutely nothing I can do about that.

Ares doesn’t respond, it takes everything in me not to look at him to see what he’s thinking or feeling. Ignoring the desire, I continue to look out the window.

Eventually, Ares lets out a heavy sigh. “I’m going to make a phone call.” I don’t bother to acknowledge his statement. I do turn to watch him as he

moves toward the kitchen area. “Hey, yeah,” he greets whoever he’s calling, then falls silent for a moment. “I just wanted to let you know it’ll be a little while before we get back.”

So, he’s probably talking to one of the guys at home. I’m not sure how I feel about him telling them it will be a while before we get home. Ares opens the fridge and ducks his head to see inside the small unit. “Later,” he mutters, the word clipped and under his breath. “I know.” He sighs shortly after. Yup, definitely one of the guys, Dante probably. “I will, see you in a bit.”

I turn back to the window and pretend I haven’t been staring at him the whole time his back was turned to me.

I want to forget the last twenty minutes. Rewind back to the moment he was desperate to be with me. Ares drops on the sofa right next to me, not leaving an inch of space. A small part of me is happy that he’s not mad that our time alone didn’t go as planned.

The other half of me doesn’t know how to move past the argument—if that was even an argument. I don’t have a ton of experience with confrontation. I always did everything my mom wanted, partly to make it easier on myself and partly because I wanted to make her happy.

“Laura,” Ares murmurs my name softly.

“Yeah?” I fiddle with the pillow.

He leans his face down into my field of vision, so I’m forced to see him. “I’m sorry,” he whispers, his dark brown eyes boring into mine.

I sniff, feeling even more guilty. “I’m sorry, too. I should have let it go.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.” He wraps his arm around the back of my neck and pulls me closer to his side. “If something is bothering you, you have to talk about it. If not, it will just eat at you.”

“There are some things I don’t think I will ever want to talk about, and your sexual history is one of them—a big one.”

Ares tilts his head so it lands on mine. “We don’t ever need to talk about it again, but I want you to know, need you to know, I was always safe.” He pauses, then turns to face me. He places his finger under my chin and turns me to look at him. “I’ve never loved anyone but you, *Cara*.” My heart softens a little at the sincerity on his face. He searches my eyes. “Not even close.”

“I know,” I tell him, and I do. I let a moment of insecurity come between us and I regret it. I cuddle closer to Ares’s side, deciding I’m not going to let it ruin the time we have together.

CHAPTER 16

“Are we sure this is a good idea?” Milo looks around the front lawn like he’s expecting Leon to jump out from behind a bush.

“We don’t really have much of a choice, the box didn’t give us any insight on where Leon is,” Ollie mumbles as the front end of a truck comes into view from the long driveway.

I reach over for Dante’s hand. His head is lowered, and there’s a fierce gleaming in his eyes while a low rumble works its way up his chest. He’ll probably scare away the construction crew Ares is bringing in to start work on the house.

“We have to find a way to draw Leon out. I’ve used every contact I have, and no one knows where he is.” Ares has the sleeves of his shirt rolled up his arms, and he looks a little out of place in his brown leather shoes and dress slacks. Most people wouldn’t guess it when they look at him, but I know he’s just as apprehensive as Dante is to let others come here, especially when we know Leon could influence any one of them. His face is a mask of calm indifference, and his stance, while tall and proud, is relaxed.

I glance over at Milo, he bobs his head a few times from left to right like a boxer getting ready to enter the ring. Ollie is tapping his hand against his thigh as he shifts his weight back and forth. None of us are comfortable, but we’re all doing our best to pretend we are.

The first truck pulls to the front of the garage and the single occupant gets out after turning the engine off. He’s a heavy man—round in the middle with soft cheeks, and his light brown hair is cropped short. He doesn’t so much walk as he pounds the ground with each step. He outstretches his paw of a hand to Ares in greeting. “Hey, Mr. Costa.” He clears his throat quickly right

after he speaks, while he struggles to maintain eye contact.

“Mr. Rudd, this is my family. Laura, Dante, Milo, and Oliver.” Ares gestures to each of us in turn.

Mr. Rudd nods his head. “Everybody on the site today is from the community,” he assures Ares, as two more trucks—these with tall ladder racks—crunch up the driveway. “Just like you requested.”

“That’s good. Dante will stay out here with them while they get set up. Laura and I will take you in for another look around to make sure we’re still on the same page. Milo already got started on the lower level project, so he’ll let you know what his plans are to finish that area.”

Dante brings my hand up to his lips and gives me a gentle kiss while keeping his eyes on the men getting out of the trucks. Then he releases me so I can follow Ares and Mr. Rudd in through the open garage. Milo could be my shadow, he trails behind me so closely.

It’s still early, so the heat of the sun isn’t warm enough to cause the sweat that’s beading Mr. Rudd’s temples, but it’s there nonetheless. I watch as he drags the back of his hand across his brow, his eyes flaring wide as he keeps a few feet between himself and Ares.

Ignoring his behavior, Ares leads the way into the shaded garage, but Mr. Rudd pauses at the threshold where the shadows are looming. I watch his head bob as he forcibly swallows.

I move around him and make my way over to Ares, who has made himself at home in the deepest recesses of the darkness where the morning sun hasn’t chased away the shadows.

I wrap my arm around his elbow and lean into his side. Is this how people always treat him? Like he’s some scary boogeyman ready to pounce at any second? Ares accepts my weight and the darkness dissipates enough to make out Mr. Rudd’s features as he finally steps into the garage.

“Phew, it’s gonna be a hot one today.” His voice is a little shaky as his eyes dart around the dim garage.

Milo takes pity on him and lifts his hand to point over at the stud wall he’s already erected. “I’d like to get this closed off first.”

Mr. Rudd walks over to the wall and kicks the bottom piece of wood. It doesn’t budge. “Looks like you did a fine job securing this.” He tries to wiggle one of the upright two-by-fours with little result.

“Yeah, I anchored it into the concrete every eighteen inches. We want this to become the lower entrance. I need it to be as strong as an exterior wall.”

“I got it. So, we’re thinking a steel entryway door then?” Mr. Rudd takes a deep breath, and his shoulders fall a little as he looks around. He seems to be slightly more comfortable now that we’re talking about the renovations. “How far do you want to come out this way?” He gestures to the area near the basement gym.

Milo motions for Mr. Rudd to follow him and continues telling him his plan for the lower level, which includes a small mudroom. I think he’s even going to have them put in a shower down here.

I bump my shoulder into Ares. “Hey, handsome.” He looks down at me, his lip quirked up along with his brow. “We got this,” I tell him reassuringly.

“I know,” he responds. His confidence is coming back, and for that I’m grateful.

“The guys are all unloaded,” Ollie calls into the garage. “Dante said we’re good to get started.”

Ares kisses the top of my head and turns to face the open bay doors. “Let them in.”

A shrill whistle rends through the air. I hear the groan Dante lets out, even though he’s still outside. “Grab whatever you need and bring it in,” Ollie directs the crew.

Dante stalks over to my side, his face almost in a sneer. “I hate it when he whistles like that,” he grates acerbically.

I pat his shoulder and arm. “I know. I can hang out down here for a bit. Why don’t you go finish your food?” Dante grumbles then heads up the stairs.

Ollie wisely waits for Dante to leave before walking over. “I didn’t do it on purpose,” he says, sulking a little.

A grin comes to my lips. “Not like last time.”

Ollie cutely scrunches up his nose. “That was pretty dickish of me,” he concedes. “Where’s Milo?”

“He’s showing Mr. Rudd the gym.” I tip my chin in the direction they went, expecting them to return anytime. It’s really not that big of a space.

“He told him about the shower, right?” Ollie looks down at me.

“I think that was the plan, but I didn’t hear him.”

“He did,” Ares confirms. “I have a few calls I need to make. You guys okay down here for a little bit?”

Ollie drapes his arm over my shoulder. “You know it.”

Ares looks around at the four men all bringing in various tool bags and

boxes like he doesn't want to leave them down here without his supervision.

"Go. Work. We got this," I urge him.

"Fine, call me if you need anything." He turns and hops up the first step.

"What about me?" Ollie calls out to him. "What if I need something? Can I call you too?" Ollie bats his long lashes at Ares, who doesn't even give him a backwards glance.

"No, get it yourself," he quips, but I can hear the smile on his lips.

Ollie clicks his tongue. "See how he treats me?" He pouts his bottom lip. I roll my eyes in response.

"No stall, just put a drain in the floor, with at least two shower heads on each wall." Milo comes out of the gym area. "Oliver already has the tile picked out, he has a list somewhere."

"Well, we'll need to get it ordered, especially if you have anything that is special order, since those can take weeks to come in," Mr. Rudd informs us.

"I'll run and grab the list. If we picked anything that isn't in stock, I'd rather find a substitute. I'm not interested in waiting." Ollie gives my back a quick rub. "I'll be right back."

That leaves me alone with Milo and the work crew. Instinctively, I step a little closer to Milo. I'm still not used to being in the middle of a group of people. But this was the plan, make it look like we're not taking the threat of Leon seriously.

Milo crosses his arms over his chest and his biceps flex with the movement. "What's your usual time frame on a project this size?"

"Just the stuff down here, or the whole job?" Mr. Rudd hooks his thumbs in the front pockets of his pants and leans back a little, making his round belly protrude even more.

"Whole job," Milo clarifies.

"Could take three weeks, a month, maybe more. Depending on materials and how many other jobs I have at the time." Mr. Rudd looks around, watching the small crew unload their tools. "Mr. Costa already expressed his desire to have the work completed quickly. That's why I wanted to let you know about the tile, I can't control the distributors."

"We can deal with that," Milo replies. "You guys ready to get started?"

"Yup, I just need to go over a few things with the guys. We should be able to finish up these walls by this afternoon." Mr. Rudd steps away from us and heads to the guys waiting on the other side of the room.

"Two shower heads on each wall, huh?" I look up at Milo. His cheeks go

a little pink.

“I just wanted a nice, big shower. The ones upstairs are cramped, and I’m not sure how much we’re changing right now,” he defends.

I step into his space, my toes touching his. “I’m not complaining about your need for cleanliness.” My voice is light and teasing. “But just how many people were you planning on getting in that shower at the same time?”

Milo looks down at me with narrowed eyes. I like teasing him a little. I’m used to being the one blushing, so I love it when it’s Milo.

He unfolds his arms and draws me closer to his chest. I can feel the hard planes of his abdomen against my breasts. My body responds to his, my nipples tightening against my bra.

“How does two... or three sound?” He bites the corner of his bottom lip. And just like that, the tables are turned, and I am the one who’s blushing. Before I can form a response, Mr. Rudd calls out to Milo.

“These guys are ready to get started. It’s going to be noisy,” he warns. “If you have that list, I can get started measuring to order the materials.”

The swift topic change is like pouring cold water on my head. Not ready to let Milo go, though, I wrap my arm around his back and lean against his side. The four men on the crew skirt around us as they get busy inspecting the wall to see where to start.

Milo looks down at me. “Can you go help Ollie find the list? I know that’s what’s taking him so long.”

“Sure, you want anything from upstairs?”

“Nah, we have a case of Gatorade down here.” Milo rubs my shoulder before releasing me.

Before I’m even up the stairs, I can hear the conversations start to pick up from the other men. “Ollie, where are you?”

“I’m up here. I can’t find the stupid list. I had it last night.” I hear a small thump as something lands on the floor from the upper level.

“I’ll check down here really quick then come help you. It was in one of Dante’s sketch books, right?”

“Yeah, the one with the black cover,” Ollie hollers down.

“They all have black covers,” Dante scoffs, before shoving half a piece of toast in his mouth. Just the smell alone has me salivating.

I find myself staring at his mouth as he raises the rest to his lips. I watch as he pulls it away, then almost takes a bite again. His tongue darts out to lick his bottom lip. He’s teasing me.

In two quick strides, I'm in front of him. Not even speaking, I snatch the toast from his fingers with my mouth, keeping my eyes locked on his as I do it.

Dante's lips part and his eyes dilate before his gaze goes heavy-lidded. He still has a small piece of bread left between his fingers. I open my mouth and angle my head so I can take the last morsel. I don't bother going for just the bread, though, I wrap my lips around his thumb and finger, too.

Dante gasps, and his rigid posture softens as I pull my head back, releasing his fingers.

"Thanks for the toast," I rasp. Before turning away from him, I make sure the entire front of my body comes into contact with his, rubbing against him.

Dante lets out a pained groan as I exit the kitchen and it puts a smile on my lips. I pause when I reach the living room and it takes me a moment to remember why I'm even here. Oh yes, the list. With one quick glance, I know it's not in here. The card table and lawn chairs don't offer much concealment for a notebook.

I make my way down the hall to the master bedroom where the door is slightly ajar. Without knocking, I walk in and ask, "Hey, have you seen the list Ollie made for the tile and flooring?"

Ares keeps his head down with his hands poised over the laptop keyboard, but his eyes lift to meet mine. "Just a moment," he mutters, and his voice has an angry edge.

"Oh, okay," I respond quickly, my back straightening.

"Not you, *Cara*. What are you looking for?" His voice is much warmer as his entire focus lands on me.

"Are you on a video call? I'm sorry," I whisper loudly.

"Don't worry about it. What did you need?"

"Dante's notebook with the material list." I keep my voice hushed.

Ares lifts a few papers next to his computer on the small table. I wonder what the people he's speaking to think about him being in this barren room instead of his office. "Here it is." He lifts the black notebook from under his pile, extending it to me.

I walk over, mindful of keeping to the side of the laptop, but my curiosity has me peeking at the screen to catch a glimpse of who he's talking with.

There are several people on the screen, all too small for me to recognize—not that I would, anyway. They're seated at a large, oval table and not making a sound as they wait for Ares's attention. I can see his face too, in the

bottom right corner, but he's watching me as I approach.

"Sorry, I should have knocked," I mouth with a wince.

"You don't need to be sorry *or* knock. Everything okay?" He raises his brows as he poses the question.

"Yes, everything is fine. I just needed this." I take the notebook from him. "I'll let you get back to it." I nod to the computer. His lips lift in a tiny grin. It seems as if he's enjoying my discomfort.

I look over my shoulder while heading out of the room, and he's still watching me. After I clear the doorframe, I hear his voice. "Where were we?" His tone is firm again. I get a thrill knowing the softer side of him is reserved just for me.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, I call up to Ollie. "I found it!" I hear another thump then Ollie comes out of our room. He pushes his long hair back from his face and stomps over to the stairway. "Where the hell was it?" he asks, exasperated.

"It was in the room with Ares."

He lets out a huff. "He must have stolen it. I know I was looking at it last night before bed."

"I can run it down. I know you mentioned wanting to take a shower," I offer, since Dante or I need to be with the crew while they're here anyway.

Ollie wraps his arm over my shoulders. "You're a goddess," he purrs into my ear. "Wanna join me?"

I backhand his chest. "You know I can't. I need to get back downstairs."

Ollie lets out a forlorn sigh. "Well, it was worth a shot."

I turn and place a soft kiss on his lips before sliding out from under his arm. His face is in a full-on pout as I walk away.

"Find it?" Dante asks around a bite of food. I lift the book in my hand as an answer. "I'll be down in a minute, after I finish up and take a piss."

I roll my eyes and shake my head. It's weird that they just announce it like that. I'm still half hiding that I do things like go to the bathroom. Not that it's a real secret, but I'd rather just pretend it doesn't happen.

"Okay, see you in a bit." I wave and pull the kitchen door closed behind me. I bounce down the stairs in a hurry to get back to Milo. I was gone longer than I thought I would be.

When my foot hits the cement floor of the garage, all the men's heads turn in my direction before quickly averting their gazes.

Milo meets me halfway and takes the notebook from my hand. "Want to

go over this with us?” he suggests.

“Sure,” I accept, happy to have something to do other than stand around. The noise of a car coming up the drive captures all of our attention before Milo can even open the book for Mr. Rudd.

“That will probably be Marcus, he was running behind this morning,” Mr. Rudd tells us, as Milo pokes his head out of the garage.

“Blue truck?” Milo inquires.

“Yeah, should be him and his son, Billy,” Mr. Rudd responds, disinterested.

The moment the door opens, I feel it, something’s off. “Milo,” I croak, my eyes wide as I try to tell him without words that something has been tainted by Leon’s influence.

I wring my hands together, the plan we made last night feels much scarier now that it’s actually happening.

Mr. Rudd steps out into the sunlight, and he shields his eyes and calls out, “Everything work out okay?”

“Yeah, sorry we’re late,” the man, Marcus, I assume, replies, already lifting a large red bag out of the back of the truck. His son, who looks pretty young, doesn’t look over at us, instead he walks around the back of the truck to meet his dad. “Probably ran over a nail at the last job or something.”

“It happens,” Mr. Rudd replies.

“You had a flat?” Milo inserts himself into the conversation.

“Yeah, I sent Billy outside to start the truck and he noticed. We had a spare, but it ate up time.”

I walk over to Milo and tug on the back of his shirt. He spares me a glance but turns back to face the group, sliding his hands into the pockets of his gray joggers.

“Hey, Billy, you go to Franklin, right?” Milo tilts his head.

Billy nods his in response, keeping quiet. An awkward silence falls briefly before Marcus, with his brow furrowed, says, “Well, where should we start?” Then he glances over at his son.

“The rest of the crew is in the garage. They can fill you in while I get the materials ordered,” Mr. Rudd responds, dismissing them.

The sounds of drills and nail guns, and compressors begin filling the hushed morning as the guys get to work.

I have a moment where I want to stop Billy from coming in. Everything about him feels wrong, off. But I hold my tongue as he passes us, his head

lowered.

I tug on the back of Milo's shirt again. He watches the two men enter the open bay doors. His lips are pressed into a hard line.

Should we really be letting him in? I don't have a chance to examine the plan further before I hear loud shouting. We all take off in the direction of the sound.

"What the fuck, Billy?" One of the men is standing with his mouth open in shock and a nail gun in his hand. He's looking around as if to ask if anyone else is seeing what he is.

Billy has a hammer in his hand and he's pounding holes in the drywall that has already been hung. He swings wildly when one of the other guys yells for him to stop and grabs his shoulder. The guy pulls back just in time to not get clobbered with the hammer in Billy's hand.

Everyone takes another step backwards and watches in horror as he tries to ruin all the work that's already been done. The loud commotion has Dante running down the stairs, and his eyes meet mine before he, too, watches Billy wreak havoc on the basement.

"It'll wear off," Milo promises, moving so he's standing between Billy and me. I can't do anything but watch in horror as he screams and bashes everything he can.

Ares appears a few feet from me, his eyes running over me before he focuses on Billy. "Can you stop him?" I inquire.

"I won't risk touching his mind right now." Ares folds his arms over his chest. The men from the crew and Mr. Rudd are all hollering for Billy to stop, but none of them want to get too close now that they know he's willing to hit them, too.

I back up a few more steps, hating the fact that all we can do is stand here and watch him. A hand clamps over my mouth from behind as I near the entrance of the garage. I kick my feet, but the scuffling can't be heard over the loud yelling and crashing sounds of Billy's destruction.

I stop fighting, making my body go limp as arms wrap around my torso, squeezing in a punishing grip.

A buzzing energy fills me, until I feel like my entire body is vibrating with power. I resume fighting, my instincts kicking in. A whiteish glow fills the dim garage and every head turns in my direction. Billy is almost forgotten as the men stare at me with shock on their faces.

My guys don't look surprised at all. They do, however, look mad as hell

as they form a line and walk toward us.

“She’ll end up killing you if you don’t release her,” Ares warns almost flatly. I can see the cracks in his façade, but they’re so minimal I’m sure the person holding me has no clue how close to the edge Ares really is.

Milo tilts his head to the side, and the veins running up his arms thicken along with the size of his shoulders. A feral growl rips from Dante’s throat, but none of them move closer to me. I don’t think any of us expected Leon to try something so soon, even though we hoped he would. It still comes as a surprise.

His arms loosen around me. “I don’t want any trouble.” The man’s voice comes out shaky.

Ollie lets out a bark of a laugh. “Then why the fuck are you here, with your hands on our Synergist?” His voice grows dark as he peers behind me from under his brow.

“He has my wife,” the man confesses, using me as a shield now.

Dante looks over at Ares. “He couldn’t have thought this would work?” Confusion is clear in his tone.

“Maybe he’s desperate?” Milo mumbles.

“Release her or I’ll kill you.” Ares threatens, and there isn’t an ounce of hesitation in his tone. The man behind me almost shoves me away from him. I stumble forward, looking over my shoulder as Ollie grabs my hands and pulls me close.

“Tell us what you were supposed to do,” Ares demands, as the man slowly backs out of the garage.

“I was just supposed to grab the girl when the kid had you guys distracted. I wasn’t ever going to hurt her,” he promises.

“Where were you supposed to take her?” Dante takes one menacing step forward.

“I was supposed to call once I got her in the car.” He looks between the guys. The noise behind us has finally died down. It seems either Marcus was able to subdue Billy or Leon’s influence has worn off.

“Don’t move.” Ares points at the man and he freezes.

“He has my wife,” the guy tells us again, wringing his hands together as sweat beads his brow.

Milo turns to face Ares. “It doesn’t make sense. Why would he send this norm in here to get her?”

“Maybe he thinks we wouldn’t hurt him?” Dante furrows his brow.

“I think it’s a trap,” I suggest when I can finally speak again. My nerves are frayed.

“It might be, but why send him in here and use his wife to control him? Why not just influence him to do what he wanted?” Milo balls his fists as he looks at the man standing across the way.

“I work for him,” the man confesses. He swallows. “He’s not able to use his ability on me; I’m immune. That’s why he took my wife and sent me.”

CHAPTER 17

“Are you sure about this?” I look up into Dante’s amber eyes.

“No,” he answers. “But Ares is, and I trust him.”

I take a deep breath. He’s right. I do, too. “Okay,” I whisper back.

“What if he hurts my wife? I’ve seen him do things...” The man trails off.

“You put yourself in this situation by working for him. I’ll do what I can for your wife, but she’s not my priority,” Ares tells him without any regret or sympathy.

The man bites his lip and grips the steering wheel. Ares continues, “Just remember: we’re the only chance you and your wife have. Leon will kill both of you either way. But if you do anything to jeopardize Laura...” Ares dips his head into the car, invading the man’s space. “What I’ll do to you will make Leon look like a saint,” Ares promises. He lets the darkness in his eyes seep out. The man next to me visibly shakes from the threat.

Ollie pushes his way past Ares and squats down next to the driver’s seat. “Once you make it to the road, make the call. Dante will be in the trunk just in case Leon has anyone watching. Once he tells you where to go, repeat it. Dante will hear you and make sure we know where to go.”

“Okay, then what?” The man is looking straight ahead.

“Then we make sure you’re not being followed, and we switch cars. You’ll wait with one of my associates and we will go take care of Leon,” Ares explains.

The man licks his lips. “And you’ll let me and Beth go afterward?” He looks up then, knowing he’s completely at our mercy.

“As long as you do what you’re supposed to, you’ll be fine,” Milo

informs him. “But you need to get going; he’s going to get suspicious if you’re here too long.”

Dante pulls on the strap of my seatbelt before he places a chaste kiss on my lips. “Be safe,” he demands, and jogs around the back of the car.

“Why can’t I go with her?” Ollie grumbles but comes over and places a kiss on the side of my mouth.

“Because Dante has the best hearing,” Milo tells him, and grabs his fingers to pull him back from the car. He meets my gaze, and he doesn’t need words to tell me he’s nervous. I can see it in the way his eyes are searching my face, and how tightly he’s holding on to Ollie’s hand. I give them both a forced smile.

Ares invades my sight, his eyes still glaring at the man next to me. “*Cara*, if he does anything besides what I told him to do, don’t hesitate. Kill him.”

The man makes a strangled sound and glances over at me quickly then looks away. “Who *are* you people?” The question falls from his lips like he didn’t mean to say it out loud.

Ares ignores him and focuses on me. “Dante will be with you the entire time, and we’ll be right behind you.” He cradles my cheek in his palm.

“Ares, I feel like this is a trap. It’s too easy, too fast.”

“I know, sweetheart, but it doesn’t matter. If it gets me close to him, we can finish this.” He searches my eyes. I reach up and hold his hand to my face.

“I don’t want this to be over. I just found you guys.” My eyes get blurry as I watch his face crumple into a frown.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” he promises.

“I’m not worried about just me,” I rush out. “You guys need to be careful, too. Promise?” I plead.

“We will be. I promise. We’ll be two minutes behind you.” He leans in and gives me a soft kiss, and neither of us close our eyes. When he pulls away, I want to beg him to come back. But I don’t. I slide my hands under my thighs and look out the front window to avoid seeing them standing next to the car.

“Remember what I told you,” Ares insists, talking to the man.

“I got it. You’ll kill me if I mess up, or Leon will.” His voice sounds flat, resigned.

Ares bangs his hand on the top of the car, and the man slowly pulls away, then he speeds up as he gains some distance.

“Slow down.” I reach for the door handle, panic filling my voice. My hand fumbles as I realize I’ve become desensitized to touch again. I guess it’s a good thing if this guy crashes, but it won’t help Dante in the trunk.

“I can’t,” is the man’s only answer as he speeds to the end of the driveway and skids into the turn to put us on the main road in front of the house.

“You’d better, or you’re going to kill us all.”

“Hand me the phone,” he demands.

I feel a little more comfortable with the speed since we’re on a real road. I make sure to wrap my fingers around the phone completely before picking it up from the center console. “Here.”

He snatches it from my hand, and the car slows a bit as he darts his eyes between the road and the phone. He smacks his palm on top of the steering wheel a few times while holding the phone to his ear. “Yeah, I got her.” He peers over at me. “It wasn’t easy; she fought like a mule, glowing all white and shit, but I got her.” He falls quiet, listening on the line, and the car gains speed again. “The kid was ripping the place apart, but I probably don’t have much time before they realize she’s gone. Where am I taking her? Just drive? But how?” He winces. “Okay, okay. Can I talk to Beth?”

“Fuck!” he shouts and slams the phone down. “I’m just supposed to drive; he must have someone following me.” He looks in the rearview mirror. I find myself looking out the back window, too.

“Dante, did you hear that?” I hear a loud thud in response.

“What’s your name?” I finally ask, after a long stretch of silence as we travel down the winding road.

He peers over at me, his brows furrowed. “Dan.”

“Well, Dan. You know him, work for him. What do you think he’s planning?”

He takes a deep breath. “I think he’s got a screw loose, and there’s no way I can predict what he’s going to do.”

“My mom, she thinks he somehow absorbed the abilities of other Infinites. Can he?” Dan might just give us some answers.

He shakes his head in denial. “I don’t think so, but he’s obsessed with trying.” The car slows a little again as we talk.

“What is it you do for him?” I try to ignore the situation I’m in and that Dante is crammed into the trunk.

“Whatever Leon asks. I drive for him. Sometimes, he’ll give me an

address, and I watch the people that come and go. But mostly, he just asks me to deliver things to people.”

“Was it you who brought the pizza to the house?”

“Yeah. I’m the only one who can touch his stuff and not get... affected,” Dan confirms.

“So, was Leon there that night? What was he hoping would happen?”

“He didn’t think one of you would answer the door. He told me you guys had people—maids or whatever. He didn’t tell me what he was hoping would happen, though.” Dan shrugs his shoulders.

The phone rings before I can ask another question. “Hello,” he answers, after fumbling to get to the phone quickly. “Yes, I know where that is... Okay. We should be there in about ten minutes.” Dan nods his head with the conversation. “And you’ll let me and Beth go once I bring her there?” Dan winces and pulls the phone from his ear a little. “Yes, okay. I got it.”

Dan sets the phone into the center console again, much gentler this time. “The botanical gardens in Spearhead,” Dan announces loudly. His hand shakes as he brings it across his brow. “Leon might be crazy, but he’s not stupid. Don’t underestimate him.”

“We won’t,” I tell Dan, trying to swallow the lump in my throat that comes with his warning. I know I’m not alone, but it feels that way right now. I glance in the side view mirror, but I don’t see Ares’s SUV. I don’t see any vehicle following behind us, but that’s the point, right?

“A botanical garden—won’t it be busy?” I muse out loud.

“Probably not this time of year, everything is going dormant for the fall,” he explains, while checking his mirrors and flipping on the turn signal. “I really hope you guys know what you’re doing,” he mumbles under his breath.



“HE’S GOING to know something is up. There’s no reason you would have stayed in the car with me without fighting,” Dan warns, as the sign for the botanical gardens comes into view. There’s a green metal gate that is pushed open, and the chain that must keep it locked when the park is closed is dangling down to the dirt road.

“Everyone here knows this whole plan stinks to high heaven, but we can’t keep sitting around waiting for Leon to attack. He thinks he has the

advantage, so do we. This is going to be a mess,” I confess under my breath, not doubting my Infinity, but nervous all the same. “Pop the trunk,” I order, before Dan slows for the turn.

He snaps his head in my direction. “But Leon might know it’s open.” Dan leans forward and reaches for the latch for the trunk.

“Dante, hold the trunk down so you can get out whenever you’re ready,” I say loud enough for him to hear me easily.

I hear the latch snap when Dan pulls the lever. “Shit,” he curses. “It won’t open while I’m driving.”

“Shit,” I echo. “Before you turn off the car, you better pull that latch,” I warn, my face in a scowl.

“He should just pull the emergency thing.” Dan’s voice is a little high-pitched with panic.

“Dante, is there a way for you to get out on your own?” I readjust in my seat. Dan’s nerves are wearing off on me.

One loud thud comes from the rear of the car. “Does that mean yes?” Another thud follows. “That better be yes,” I say under my breath, and fold my arms over my chest.

The car slowly bumps over small potholes in the gravel road. I don’t see anyone around, but we haven’t made it to the parking lot yet—I’m assuming there is one.

“There’s no way for the others to sneak into this place unless they come on foot.” I look around at the open field with tall grass surrounding the single lane road.

“Why do you think he picked it?” Dan shoots back. There’s another set of green gates ahead, and this one only has one side open. Dan steers the car through the gate and into a wide-open parking lot. There’s a black Town Car parked with its front end facing us. A small, shed-like building is situated behind the car. I can see a driver, but I can’t see into the rear of the car.

Dan puts his car in park and looks over at me. “I think we’re supposed to get out.” I look out at the car again, then grab the door handle. Something inside me is telling me to stay in the car, but the Town Car flashes its head lights. “We need to get out,” Dan mutters urgently, while reaching for the handle and rushing to stand. “Come on.” He waves his hand at me to follow him.

As soon as I step foot on the gravel, the Town Car lurches forward. I jump back to avoid being crushed between the open car door and the front

end of the Town Car as it slides across the front fender of Dan's car and slams my door closed. It swerves around me and skids to a halt, pinning me between the two vehicles.

The rear door opens, and hands drag me into the sedan before my brain has a chance to process what's happening. I scream as the door slams behind me. The Town Car scrapes against Dan's car and speeds away.

The shock has me frozen until I see Dante pop out of the trunk and Dan run after the car screaming about his wife. I look around the car and see an unfamiliar man sitting in the seat next to me. I struggle until the man under me shoves me over to land in the middle between them.

"Stop the car!" I scream, scooting toward the front seat so I'm almost kneeling on the floorboard.

No one acknowledges me. "Let me out!" I shout as we speed through the first entrance to the park. Again, no response. The man who pulled me into the car reaches for me again. I dip my shoulder. "Don't touch me," I growl. He pulls his hand back but doesn't show any other reaction to my snarl.

I look over at the other man; his face is blank. "Shit," I curse, realizing that these men are more than likely under Leon's influence. Leon probably controls most of the people who work with or for him.

I tighten my elbows against my body, but I can't tell if the phone tucked into the inside waistband pocket of my leggings is still there. My skin is still desensitized. I should have let the car just hit me, but my first reaction was to get out of the way. I can only hope that I still have the phone, and that the tracking app will work. None of us had wanted it to get this far.

"Pull over the car." I focus my attention on the driver. I want to scream in frustration when he ignores me, too. I could make him crash the car, but then it would probably end up killing these men, and I still wouldn't know where Leon is.

I glance at the rearview mirror, hoping to see Dan's car, but I don't. There's a small sedan a few car lengths back with a woman in the driver's seat.

As spacious as the backseat is, I still feel crowded by the strange men. I'm not really afraid of them, though; I can hurt them if they try to harm me. But I hate being separated from my Infinity. I tuck my body as tightly as possible against the front seat. It leaves my back exposed to one of the men, but he hardly seems interested in me now that I'm in the car.

The minutes tick by slowly, and the anticipation of what's going to

happen has my belly in knots. The car finally slows and travels up a short driveway, and the light filtering in through the windows dims as we enter a structure that looks like a large garage.

I fidget, knowing at any second they're going to expect me to get out of this car. I might need to fight for my life, and for my Infinity.

CHAPTER 18

I hear the hum of the garage door as it closes behind us. Most of the sun is blocked out, but there are exposed light bulbs hanging from the wooden rafters, keeping the space from being too dark.

The man who pulled me into the car opens his door, grabs hold of the back of my shirt, and drags me from the floorboard. I struggle long enough to realize I'm only making it harder on myself. My nails elongate, and I feel the telltale ache of my gums telling me my body is reacting to the violence, even if I'm trying not to hurt them. I swipe behind me, hoping to catch his arm. He drops me as a hiss leaves his lips. I crouch on the seat, ready to spring at him, when I see him cradling his arm to his chest with rivulets of blood already streaming from his arm.

He looks up at me, confused, with shock clear on his face. His eyes are clear as he looks around. I think the pain in his arm was enough to wake him from Leon's control. But I still can't trust him. I turn until my back is to the rear seat, so I can see both men and the driver.

A door opens and I hear solid footsteps tapping on the cement floor of the garage. More on edge than ever, I peer in the direction the sound is coming from. Leon lowers his head and stares at me through the open door. He looks completely calm, smug even. "How was your drive?" he inquires, as if we're old friends.

"What do you want from me?"

"Where are my manners? Come in, come in." Leon waves me out of the car as if I'm to be greeted by a red carpet.

I lick my dry lips, trying to decide how to best approach this. I need to buy time—should I play along, or fight him every step of the way? I slowly

lower myself into the seat.

Leon tilts his head, examining me. My stomach turns as he leers at me and the tiger stripes spreading up my arms. I want to pull the power back. I feel too exposed with the way he's looking at me, but the beast inside of me wants to snap at him for even daring to look.

"You're quite lovely," Leon mutters, almost like it comes as a surprise to him. My lip lifts, exposing my teeth in a snarl. If he touches me, I don't think I'll be able to stop myself from ripping his hand off, he sets every nerve I have on edge.

His eyes go a little round as he blinks at me. "Are you coming?" He turns his back to me, which pisses me off more. Who does he think he is, dismissing me?

"And if I don't?" I growl back.

"Well, then, you'll never meet your father," he says blandly and walks away, leaving me with my mouth hanging open and my thoughts spiraling, wondering if he's telling the truth. The two men and the driver trail after him without prompting.

Warring with indecision, I feel around the waistband of my leggings, and it takes me a second, but I'm able to get the phone from my pocket. The screen comes to life immediately. At least I didn't drop it in the scuffle. Should I chance calling them? I look up to the door and see Leon poke his head back out. I lower my hand, hoping the glow from the phone isn't obvious. He waves his hand, gesturing for me to come in before disappearing behind the door again.

Trusting that the guys will find me, I work to get the phone back into my inner pocket and exit the car before he comes back looking for me again.

I peek around the door, expecting someone to jump out and snatch me and pull me in the house, but the hall is empty. Climbing the two steps, I find myself looking at a wide, wooden staircase. I step onto the thin carpet, and the floor creaks beneath my feet. To the left, I see a doorway leading to a white-tiled kitchen. The appliances are old, antiques even, but it's spotless. Taking another step, I look to the right and see another doorway, but the room beyond is dark.

Footsteps above me have me ducking like I'm sneaking around, but I straighten, remembering they already know I'm here. Making my way over to the staircase, I glance up. The wooden banister is shiny, and the gold rods holding the threadbare carpet in place against the risers are clean, but this

house feels haunted, like every corner should be filled with shadows and cobwebs. The neatness makes it even creepier.

Low voices filter down to me, too muffled for me to make out. I turn my ear to the sound and let it guide me. The seventh stair whines in protest when I settle my weight on it. “That should be Laura. She looks just like Amanda, it’s strange really...” Leon trails off, and it sounds as if he’s speaking to an old friend. I don’t hear a response in return.

Quickening my steps, I rush to the top of the stairs. The possibility of my father being here provides too much of a lure for me to ignore. The hallway is wide, giving way to three closed doors and one that is slightly ajar.

I inch closer, my heart beating fast in my chest as I drag in breaths of air tinged with a chemical odor. “Come in, come in,” Leon beckons.

Peering into the room, I find him seated on the edge of a bed. There’s a thin lump under a white blanket. “It was hard being away from him while your mother was here.” Leon touches the end of the lump where you would expect feet to be.

“But I had to keep them apart,” he tells me, his voice strangely devoid of any real emotion.

I’m drawn into the room, even though the sense of wrongness permeates the air. The body beneath the blanket jerks, and it startles me enough that I jump. Whoever it is under those covers is frail, small, like a child.

I lick my dry lips and flick my gaze to Leon. I know I’ve heard that he was crazy—hell, I think I’ve said it myself—but this level of crazy is more than I expected.

“Why did you need to keep them apart?” my voice is whisper soft as I slowly make my way over to the bed. Please don’t let that be a decomposed body under those blankets. I’m getting Norman Bates vibes big time.

Leon looks at me with his head cocked to the side. “Your mother is our Synergist,” he replies, like I’m foolish for not already knowing.

“But you wanted me to meet him?” I’m close enough now that I could reach out and touch the bed, but I keep my hands balled up at my sides. My shoulders are up near my ears, I’m so freaked out. Whatever is in this bed scares me more than Leon. Why? I have no clue, but it kinda does.

“Yes, so then you’ll stay with us. Let me continue my work,” Leon reasons.

“What work is that?” I lift my hand, almost brave enough to reach for the blanket.

“I fear Wyatt has given about all he has to the cause.” Leon sighs, as if he’s put out with the shortcomings.

“He’s been working with you then?” My voice is breathy as I pinch the edge of the blanket between my fingers.

“He has. He was reluctant at first, but he saw reason in the end.” Leon nods with confidence.

I tug the blanket back with a jerk of my hand. The gasp of shock that leaves my lips is pure horror. The man lying on his side is so thin and frail, he’s barely recognizable as a person. His spine protrudes out from his back, along with every other bone that isn’t hidden under the thin pants he’s wearing.

I take a step back, my hands coming up to cover my mouth. This person can’t be alive. I shake away my horror at the amount of suffering a person would be enduring if they were, in fact, alive.

Then the body moves, and a scream rips from my throat as I scramble to get away. I end up on my butt with my legs kicking to push me back farther.

“Now, that’s no way to greet your father,” Leon chastises me. I glance up at him, then back at the bed. Could what he’s saying be true? Could that really be Wyatt?

“What have you done to him?” I’m not ready to accept he’s really Wyatt, but whoever he is, Leon needs to die for the torture he’s put him through.

Leon stands, his head tilted to the side. “I told you, child. He’s been working with me on my research.” His tone is indignant.

I push off the floor, feeling guilty for my response to the person in the bed. A hot seed of rage bubbles up inside me, overriding my guilt. The air around me warms as my hair lifts into the air.

“Ah, you see, you are much stronger than he is. While I hate to lose my companion, my research is much more important.” Leon settles his intertwined hands down at his waist and looks at me expectantly.

“You are one crazy motherfucker if you think you’re going to do that,” I point at the bed, “to me.” Leon’s brow furrows in confusion.

I peek out the door behind me and step to the side, making sure the other men in the house won’t be able to sneak up and grab me again. He actually has the nerve to look affronted by my response.

“Well...” He breathes, clearly offended. “You’ll come around, too, just like Wyatt did.”

A groan from the bed has me looking down. The sound is filled with pain

and sorrow. I can't help but take a step closer to the bed to ease him.

Leon moves in my direction with his hand lifted as if he might try to touch me. I retreat. "I'm warning you, don't touch me."

I can feel Ollie's energy pouring into me. I've never been able to sustain this much power without it feeling like my insides were vibrating, but I can now. Whether it's because we're all fully bonded, or because I fear ending up like the poor person in the bed, I don't know and I don't care.

"Now, don't try that nasty, little shifting ability. You might end up hurting yourself," he cautions. I back up as he approaches; I need time to think. Should I shift and try to cut him with my claws? It's a risk. I have no idea how strong he is, or if I could actually do enough damage before he could touch me and use his ability to influence me and, God forbid, do what he did to Wyatt. Or, I could take a chance.

My back hits the wall and Leon is still stalking over, his hands raised out in front of him. I lift my chin in defiance, waiting for exactly the right moment: for him to think I'm trapped and at his mercy.

"That's it, this will all be over soon," he croons. When he's centimeters away from me, I meet his eyes and let the current building inside me flare to the surface. His mouth pops open in a circle, and his eyes go wide in shock as a bright, white light fills the room. When he pulls back like he's going to retreat, I reach out and grab his wrist.

The door bursts open at the same second. Dante is standing in the doorway, his chest heaving as he roars out an inhuman sound.

But it's too late; the damage is already done. I pushed every bit of power I had right into Leon. He is crumpled on the floor at my feet, with smoke coming off the top of his head and a thick, black line of char snaking up his neck.

CHAPTER 19

I drop to the floor right next to Leon. Every ounce of energy I had moments ago is now gone. Dante rushes over and drags me away from Leon's body. The smell that fills the air is enough to make me choke.

"Up here!" Dante shouts, while stroking his finger over my cheek. "You're okay, it's okay." I think he's talking more to himself than me. I close my eyes and swallow thickly. I can taste the ozone in the back of my throat.

"I'm pretty sure he's dead." My voice sounds hollow.

"Shush." Dante cradles me against him, rocking me like I'm a child. "I'm so sorry I was too slow," he mutters into the top of my head. "He took you," he states, still talking to himself. The noise of the others bounding up the stairs comes before I can even see Ollie. I tug on the string that connects us, and he stumbles through the door, grunting. Milo grabs him under his arm and hauls him over like a sack of potatoes.

Ares walks over to Leon and nudges his body with the front of his shoe. His face is set in a grim mask when he turns to face me. I look away, not wanting to see his gaze if he thinks less of me for doing it. Leon deserved it.

A low sound has everyone in the room spinning to face the bed. The room grows dark as Ares pulls the shadows. The darkness is like a living thing, rising up from his shoulders and arms like it could reach out.

"It's Wyatt." I lean into Dante's embrace, hiding my face against his soft shirt. I feel him go rigid, then he gathers me closer against his body.

The sheer shock of my statement sends the room into a flurry of activity. Dante stands up with me cradled in his arms. My head lolls against his chest as I look over at the bed.

Wyatt lifts his frail arm a few inches off the bed, before his eyes close, and his hand drops back to the mattress. I struggle to get out of Dante's arms as a sense of urgency comes over me.

"Help him, we have to help him." I push away from Dante, stumbling a little as I make my way over to the bed. The horror of his appearance has worn off, leaving behind only sympathy and the need to help him.

"Get my mom." I wipe at my blurry eyes as I move to the side of the bed, much like Leon was seated not long ago.

There are some shuffling noises behind me, hushed voices, but I ignore them and gently lay my hand on Wyatt's forearm. I can feel his bones under my hand. I have to grit my teeth to keep my palm in place, but I do. "It's okay, we're getting help," I tell him, not sure if he can even hear me. I choke on a sob when his eyes slit open. "Hi," I breathe out.

He opens his mouth and a wheeze of air passes his lips. "Don't try to talk." I wipe my eyes again and glance up at the ceiling. It feels as if I have a lead ball in my throat. I force myself to swallow and look down again. He's blurry, but I give him my best smile and graze my fingers over his arm. His fingers twitch with the touch. "Ares," I call over my shoulder. "What can we do?" I can't stop the tears or the whimper in my voice.

A warm palm lands on my shoulder. "Your mother is coming," he promises. I look up at him with the question of if it will be enough written in my eyes. Ares's lips thin into a tight line. He's not going to give me an answer he doesn't know.

Instead, he crouches at the side of the bed, placing his hand on my knee. "Amanda will be here soon," he tells him. Wyatt's eyes close on a shallow exhale. His face is almost skeletal, it's so thin. I cover my mouth with the back of my hand, uselessly trying to hold in my horror.

I can't help but think about all the times I went to bed hungry, how hollow my stomach would feel until I eventually fell asleep, only to wake up feeling even worse. How has he survived? Is this what Leon did to him to keep him from trying to leave, or is this the result of his research?

Dante strokes his hand over my hair, stepping up to my side. I turn my head and bury my face in his lower stomach, my shoulders shaking with each silent sob. Is there any coming back from this? And if he does survive, will he even be sane?

Dante makes soft sounds of reassurance as he cradles my head against his belly. I feel another hand on my back, and another, until I'm connected to all

of my guys. Another wave of guilt spills over me—this time for falling apart.

It takes me a long time to pull myself together. The room is quiet except for my sniffing. When I pull back from Dante, his shirt is wet and clinging to his stomach. I try to fluff the fabric, embarrassed that I cried so hard. He swats my hand away with a click of his tongue.

“They should be here soon,” Ollie announces, his voice thick with emotion. I nod and drag in a shuddering breath.

“Should... should we warn them?” I peek at Wyatt’s prone form, hoping he doesn’t take offense. Thankfully, it looks like he is sleeping, or something close to it anyway. His chest is rising and falling quickly with little pants. I look away again.

“I mentioned something on the phone,” Ares replies. “Why don’t you all go downstairs; I’ll wait here. Dante, you should talk to Mamma and Amanda. Just tell them, tell them...” Ares shakes his head, at a complete loss for words.

“Wait.” I grab Milo’s arm. “There were three other men here, the ones from the car,” I rush out, looking over at the door, surprised they haven’t come in here yet.

“Not an issue,” Ollie informs me. Before I have a chance to ask what happened, the door downstairs slams open.

“Where are you?” Rosa shouts.

“Wait for us, Rosa,” Mal scolds her. She reponds quickly with a long string of Italian, and even though I have no idea what she’s saying, I cringe for Mal. It sounded like she just gave him an earful.

“I’ll go get them,” Milo offers, hustling out of the room. I hear him stomp down the stairs, then a few seconds of hushed conversation follows.

“You’re lying,” my mom accuses in outrage. Another round of low voices passes. I’ve accepted Wyatt is the man in the bed, and he stirs again with my mother’s voice, his head moving from left to right in tiny increments as he makes a low, mournful sound.

“Shush, it’s okay. She’s coming,” I assure him.

“No.” He pushes the sound out more than actually speaking.

“No? Why?” I look over at the guys, wondering if I got this wrong.

“Run.” His voice sounds like it hasn’t been used in years, all gravelly and hoarse.

My heart falls, as do my shoulders. “You’re worried about Leon?” It’s not really a question. “He’s gone. He can’t hurt you anymore, he can’t hurt

anyone anymore.” I’m crying again, but I don’t know why. Wyatt shakes his head again like he doesn’t believe me.

A sound of anguish draws my attention to the door. My mother is standing there with tears already falling down her cheeks, and her hand held against her lips. She’s frozen, her eyes locked on Wyatt’s form. I pull the covers up a little to cover his emaciated back. I’m trying to protect both of them.

Wyatt draws in a deeper breath and his eyes pop open with a feverish light. A loud thump sounds. My mother is on her knees, her face white as a sheet. Ollie rushes to her side, but Rosa is there first. Mom gasps, sounding like she’s been starved for oxygen.

I stand, my concern blooming. She crumples to the floor, her mouth gaping like a fish. Her eyes are locked on the bed. “What’s happening?” I shout, searching everyone’s faces for an answer.

Milo wraps his arm around my waist and draws me back against him when I would have moved to go to my mother. “Leon starved him of power,” he tells me, just above a whisper.

“He’s killing her,” I accuse.

“He can’t help it, *Cara*. He won’t take too much, I promise.” Ares settles himself in front of me and cradles my cheeks in his hands, blocking my view.

Seconds tick by and, if I didn’t trust him so much, I would fight him. But I do trust him, so I just stare at him while feeling completely useless.

Murmurs of comfort start to filter in. Ares breaks our stare and looks over his shoulder. He takes one hand off my face and turns so he’s facing my mom. She’s still on the floor, but her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes are thrown wide in disbelief.

She pushes against the ground like she’s going to try to stand, but her legs wobble. Mal reaches for her arm and steadies her, not releasing her as she lumbers over to the bed.

“Wyatt?” She sounds so unsure. I glance at the figure in the bed. He’s still shockingly thin, but I can already see the difference her presence is having on him.

His eyes are open and alert. He lifts his lip like he’s trying to answer, but only a low moan escapes. My mom hits the floor again, her knees smacking against the wood, but this time it’s different. He’s not drawing power from her. This time, it’s just her inability to stand against what she’s seeing. Her head hits the mattress, and she lets out a howl of pain.

Milo tightens his arms around me. Slowly, Wyatt reaches over and places his hand on top of Mom's head. His eyes fall closed with a sigh as sobs rack her body. She starts muttering incoherently through her tears.

"Let's give them a few minutes," Ares suggests, turning his back on the scene to offer what little privacy he can. Reluctantly, I follow him out of the room with everyone else trailing after us. Rosa is leaning against William, not bothering to hide the fresh tears on her face.

We make our way downstairs in the strange house. I look around, and the creepiness hasn't abated even though I know Leon isn't here anymore. "What are we going to do about Leon? Should we call the police?" I bring my fingers up to my mouth. It's the first time I've actually thought about the consequences of what I've done. Could I go to jail for this?

"I'll handle it. We'll notify the council, but we don't need to get the police involved, they wouldn't understand," Ares answers, looking around the wide hallway.

Rosa is the first to make her way into the kitchen. Mal pulls out a chair from a small, four-seater table stationed near a nook in the corner. She almost falls into the seat.

"My goodness, I never expected..." Rosa doesn't even finish, but we all know what she's referring to.

"Do you think he's going to be okay? He looked... so not okay," I murmur, stumbling over the words.

Rosa reaches across the table and takes my hand in hers. "We're going to do everything we can to make sure he recovers," she promises, meeting my eyes.

CHAPTER 20

“Are you sure we should be leaving?” I look back at Ares, who’s standing in the side door of the house. “Won’t I need to be here to tell them what happened? What I did?”

“Ares is going to take care of it, you don’t need to be here for that.” Dante continues to usher me to the black SUV parked next to the house. I feel like I’m abandoning Ares, Milo, my mom, and Wyatt. Rosa and the guys are already in the car waiting for us.

“He’s not going to get in trouble, is he?” I lower my voice so Ares can’t hear me asking.

“No, Muenster, he’s not going to get in trouble.” Ollie opens the rear door ahead of Dante and me.

I bite my lip. Should I leave him to deal with my mess? “It will be easier on him if we’re not here,” Ollie reasons, understanding my hesitancy.

That gets me moving. I duck my head and slide into the backseat, going all the way over to sit behind William, who’s driving. “Why?”

“Because then he won’t be worried about you. He’ll be able to go over everything that happened with them and not have to wonder where you are, or if anything that you hear will bother you,” Dante tells me, as Ollie slides into the middle seat next to me and he climbs in after him, before closing the door.

Mal, in the far backseat, lays his hand on my shoulder. “They’ll be fine, Laura. You don’t need to worry.”

“Do you think the council will be able to help Wyatt?” I muse out loud.

“They might. I know there are a few Infinities that have an affinity for healing, most of them end up as doctors or nurses,” William answers, already

backing down the driveway.

Ares is still standing in the doorway, watching us leave. I lift my hand in a wave, but the windows are probably too dark for him to see me. “I hope someone can help him. I can’t imagine living through what he’s endured.”

Ollie runs his hand up and down my thigh. “He’s strong, Laura; he would have to be to survive what he’s been through. He’ll come through this. Your mom, too.”

I think back to a few moments ago when I went to tell my mom I was leaving. She was on the bed with Wyatt, her hip up near his chest while she stroked her fingers through his thin hair. His eyes were closed, but his face was soft and relaxed.

She was calm, the tears had finally stopped flowing. She appeared focused, with grim determination written all over her face. She didn’t even seem to notice the way Wyatt’s bones poked out of his shoulders sharply, or the sunken appearance of his facial features. She actually smiled at me. “We’ll be along once Wyatt wakes up,” she told me, as though he were just taking a little afternoon nap.

God, I hope for both their sakes he can make it through this. If not, I don’t think my mother will be able to bear losing him again.

I lay my head on Ollie’s shoulder and let out a heavy sigh. I thought I would feel more relief knowing Leon wasn’t a threat to us anymore. But dealing with the aftermath of the damage he’s caused is going to be much harder than I ever imagined.

The radio is playing softly, keeping the ride home from being completely silent.

“You’re taking us home, right?” Dante asks, as William approaches an intersection.

“You don’t want to come to the house?” Rosa sounds a little surprised.

“Nah, not right now, Mamma,” he tells her kindly. “Maybe we’ll come over once the guys are home, but I think we need some time.” He glances over at me. I don’t disagree. I feel exposed and raw, and every time I close my eyes I either see Wyatt crumpled in that bed or the surprised look on Leon’s face when I reached for his arm.

“No problem.” William guides the SUV into the turn lane. Dante wraps his arm over Ollie’s shoulder and places his hand on the back of my neck. I feel his fingers threading through my hair softly.

Going home sounds like an amazing idea. I want to curl up under the

blankets and forget about the last few hours—at least long enough for my brain to process everything that happened today.

All the work trucks are gone when we pull up the driveway. The house is invitingly dark. It dawns on me then how much I already consider this my home. I reach for the door handle as soon as the car stops. Dante is just as fast on his side. Ollie climbs out after me, and Mal moves up to the middle row of seats as William rolls down his window. “If you guys need anything, we’re only a phone call away,” he offers.

“We know,” Ollie acknowledges, while Dante makes his way over to us.

“You guys have keys to get in?” Rosa lowers her head so she can see us out William’s window.

“We do.” Ollie reaches in his front pocket and holds up a small set of keys.

“All right. Try to relax. Everything is going to be fine now,” William promises.

“We’ll see you guys later.” Dante ignores the statement and lifts his palm in a wave, he reaches for my hand with his other one and tugs me toward the front staircase.

Ollie is close behind us as we make our way up, and the SUV doesn’t pull away until we’re all in the house and the door is closed behind us.

“I don’t want to build another house. I like this one,” I announce, toeing off my shoes.

“Where did that come from?” Ollie kicks his shoes into the empty corner of the room.

“I just like this house; it feels like home.” I look around the spacious room, wondering if I’m placing too much importance on a place, but it doesn’t feel like it. I like the knotty floors and the creaky stairs, but my favorite part is the front porch and all the windows. When you look out from upstairs, it feels like you’re on top of the world, like nothing can reach us.

Ollie peers at me skeptically before rolling his eyes a little. “As long as you’re happy.”

“Are you hungry?” Dante inquires, before I can tell Ollie it’s not just me who needs to be happy.

It’s been hours since I’ve eaten, and I couldn’t even tell you what time it is, but the thought of food actually makes my stomach roll. “No.” I’m sure my face is scrunched in a grimace. “You guys should eat though. I think I’m going to grab a shower.”

“You sure?” Dante looks at me like I might fall apart if I’m alone for a second.

“Yeah. I just feel kinda blah, and I want to get cleaned up.” And maybe cry where no one can see or hear me, but I don’t say that part out loud.

“Ollie, you want anything?” Dante turns his attention to his friend.

“Probably should. Don’t know if we’ll get a chance later.” He follows Dante into the kitchen. I listen to their muffled voices for a few seconds before making my way upstairs. All my clothes are up here, might as well use this shower, and then that way I’m close to the bed when I’m done. I’m suddenly very tired.



THE BED SHIFTING STIRS ME, but I don’t even open my eyes. Instead, I wiggle back until my butt connects with Dante. I know it’s him from his scent and the purr of the connection burning between us.

He wraps his arm over my waist and places a soft kiss on my shoulder, nuzzling me. My body relaxes again. Just as I’m about to fall back to sleep, a flash of Leon fills my mind. My entire body jolts. I push out a sigh, not again. It took me forever to fall asleep. Dante curls himself around me tighter. “Shush,” he mutters, and circles his finger around my belly button.

“Are they home yet?” I croak and rearrange my head on the pillow.

“On the way now. They’re taking your mom and Wyatt over to my parents’ house. I didn’t mean to wake you, go back to sleep.” His voice is pitched deliciously low.

I lick my lips and swallow. My mouth is dry, but I can still taste the toothpaste I used after my shower, so I haven’t been out long. Instead of listening, I turn over and face him. Dante’s eyes meet mine. There’s a question there as he studies me, he wants to know if I’m okay.

I tip my neck back and place my lips against his. I’m not okay, but I will be. Right now, though, I just want to forget about Leon for a little while. I just want to feel Dante surrounding me.

Dante kisses me back softly, like I’m made of spun sugar and might melt. I push his shoulder roughly and climb over him. His eyes flash with something that excites me even more. I dip my face down to his and use my teeth along his jaw. He angles his head back, giving me better access. Dante’s

hands go to my hips and his fingers dig in, causing a flare of pain, building my desire even more.

I bite the side of his neck, and he lets out a low moan in response. “Laura,” he pants, “are you sure?”

I don’t even bother responding. Instead, I circle my hips and move back to his mouth. I’m not gentle when I shove my tongue between his lips. He doesn’t seem to mind a bit as he lifts his head off the pillow and meets me with just as much fervor of his own. My hands go to the t-shirt covering his chest.

“Why are you wearing clothes?” I glide my hand under his shirt and feel his abdominal muscles bunch beneath my fingers.

“I didn’t want to you to think I was going to try anything,” he says between kisses.

I lean back and look down at him. “Do you want me to stop?” I tilt my head to the side and lick my bottom lip, praying he doesn’t.

“Is that a real question?” he growls at me, pulling me against him tighter and lifting his hips off the bed to grind up into me.

“I guess not.” I lean back down and seal my lips to his. Dante slides his hands under my oversized t-shirt and lets out a purr of satisfaction when he feels I’m bare beneath. “Get a condom,” I order lifting up off him. Dante rolls off the edge of the bed with feline grace and springs up with a pounce. I watch his back as he prowls over to his bag which is heaped on the floor with all our other stuff, He reaches in and pulls back quickly. When he turns, his head is lowered, but his eyes are locked on mine.

“Take your clothes off,” I demand harshly. I fold my knees under me and continue watching as Dante tosses the square on the bed and grabs his t-shirt by the back of his collar. He tugs it off and drops it on the floor, the muscles roping up his sides flexing. My mouth goes dry. That is mine.

My head lowers as I peer up at him. He reaches for his soft gym shorts. I can already see how much the material is tented, so it comes as no surprise when his erection bobs up as soon as the material is past his hips. He steps forward and awaits my next instruction, lips parted and eyes dilated in anticipation.

“Get on the bed—flat on your back.” He crawls forward and kneels on the bed, sprawling out on his side then rolling over onto his back. His chest is heaving like he just ran a mile. I run my fingers down his abdomen and stop just above the dark patch of short hair between his hips. His muscles tighten

and his cock twitches. I crawl closer to him, ready to climb back onto him, but the black square catches my eye.

I lean over him, making sure to drag my breast over his chest to grab the foil packet. He lets out a hiss and closes his eyes. A grin tugs at my lips. I love this feeling of power; I feel like I'm finally in control of something for once.

When I pull back, I place a soft kiss on the tip of his cock as a small reward. His back jerks off the bed before he settles again. I kneel and tear the package open with my teeth. Dante's eyes are wide as he stares at me.

When I wrap my hand around the base of him, his hips swivel, and he fists the sheets at his sides. I slide the condom on him, fumbling a bit to get it to roll down over his length. Once it's on, I move to straddle him again, but Dante grabs my wrist. He lifts his head off the pillow and licks his bottom lip.

"W-would you..." he stammers, before asking, "Would you lie on me?" His eyes pinch at the side, as if he's worried what I might say.

I'm a little confused, since that's what I was just about to do. When I nod and lift my leg to straddle his hips, he stops me again. "No, I mean on your back. Will you lie on me flat like this?" He uses his free hand and shakes it over his body.

I furrow my brow, really confused now. But if it means enough to him to ask me, of course I will. I drag the t-shirt over my head and peer down at him. Trying to figure out how to do this. Awkwardly, I throw my opposite leg over him and straddle his waist backwards.

Dante growls and his hips lift off the mattress, so I guess this is what he wanted. He sits up behind me, and I slide down lower so his erection is right beneath me. I squirm a little until he wraps his arms around my chest and lifts me up a little. When he slides me back down, he guides his erection inside me. I groan at the fullness. Dante lies back on the mattress and drags me down with him. The angle switches, and I let out a gasp of surprise at how deep he goes. Once I'm settled, he removes his arm from my chest and caresses his fingertips down my sides, then wraps his hands around my hips, his fingertips curling over my hipbones hard enough to cause a pinch of pain.

I stare up at the ceiling, trying to catch my breath, enjoying the feeling of him beneath me, but not sure how to proceed from here.

Dante pants into my hair, right near my ear. "Oh fuck," he mutters, and swivels his hips while pulling me up a little higher then pushing me down. I bend my knees a little and plant my feet on the bed between his legs. That

gives me more control so I can push against him myself. One of Dante's hands snakes up my center and palms my breast. My nipple tightens and I arch my back. Oh, I like this.

We rock together, his thrust meeting my searching hips every time. The hand on my breast continues to pinch and roll my nipple, then his other hand skims past my belly button and glides down to my center.

His long finger slides between my legs and finds my clit. My body goes rigid as his finger circles me. I'm afraid to even move—it feels so good. "Don't stop." My voice is husky. I glance down to see his hands on my body and catch a glimpse of Ollie standing in the doorway.

His bottom lip is pinched between his teeth, and his eyes are roaming over our bodies with a hungry look on his face. I let my head fall back, and the thought of how Dante would feel about this comes to the surface of my mind, but it shatters when he pounds up into me while holding me in place with his hands locked on my body.

My legs start to shake as my orgasm begins to build. All I can think about is reaching that pinnacle. A deep rumble comes up from Dante's chest. I feel it as it rolls up my back. "Laura," he croons in my ear in that deep, gravelly voice I haven't been able to resist from the first time I met him.

I look up and see Ollie still watching us, his heat rolling through the room like a fire has been lit. A shiver of excitement raises gooseflesh over my sensitized skin. Holy hell, his watching us is making me even hotter.

Dante grunts and he starts to move faster. I can't stop the wave of bliss crashing over me. I cry out, my body going rigid over Dante. He lets out a deep growl and really starts to jerk his hips up with an erratic rhythm.

I can't do anything but fold my arms over his across my chest and hold on. Within seconds, Dante lets out a long groan, and his body goes tight before he slows his pace. The only sounds in the room are our mingled huffs as we try to catch our breath.

I glance up to the doorway, but Ollie is gone. No evidence he was ever even there.

CHAPTER 21

Heavy footsteps on the garage stairs alert me that Ares and Milo are finally home. I jump up from the lawn chair and head toward the sound. Dante is already opening the door when I reach the room. I cross my arms over my stomach and lean against the wall.

Milo enters the kitchen first. He looks up, but then quickly averts his eyes from me. It's not a good sign. Ares follows closely behind him. He blows out a heavy breath when he sees me but holds my stare.

"Where are they?"

"We got them settled at Mamma's." Ares steps over to the fridge and pulls out a bottle of water. I look over at Milo again, Ollie is at his side.

Licking my lips, I hesitantly ask, "How were they?"

"I called a healer that works with the council." Ares cracks the lid to the bottle and brings it to his lips, taking a long draw. "They've never dealt with anything like this, but... they're cautiously hopeful," he finishes.

Why is Milo being so quiet? "What aren't you telling me?"

"There's still a lot we don't know," Milo finally speaks up.

"Like?" I prompt. Milo looks at Ares, like he's asking for permission or wondering if he should tell me. Ares does an infinitesimal nod.

"Well... we don't know what Leon did to him, Wyatt... your dad..." Milo's face falls in a heavy frown. "We need to think about more than just the physical aspect of his recovery."

"Like, we need to worry if he's going to be crazy after what Leon did to him? I've already been thinking about that," I tell them, and run my hand over my ponytail. Milo nods quickly, his lips rolling in.

"Did he wake up again?" I run my eyes over both of the guys, noting the

slump of Milo's shoulders.

"Not much, he opened his eyes a few times, your mom stayed with him, and it seemed to help. He looked more... relaxed." Ares shakes his head like he's not sure that's the right way to describe it.

I get it. "Are you guys hungry?" I feel bad they were out dealing with everything while I was here.

"No, Rosa made us some sandwiches. I need a shower though." Milo pulls his shirt away from his body and lets it snap back. "I moved a few things around so they could have our old room, so it would be easier for Wyatt to get around once he's... getting around," Milo stammers.

"Thank you both. Thank all of you for taking care of them." I pass my gaze around to all of them. Suddenly feeling very emotional again, I bite the inside of my lip and paste a smile on my face. Ollie makes his way over to my side.

"Always, Muenster. We're a team." He reaches for my chin and tugs down, so I release my lip from between my teeth. Ollie wraps his arm over my shoulder and faces the other guys. "Why don't we watch a movie or something? I'm down for some bed time." He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

I knock my elbow into Ollie's side gently, but grin up at him. His eyes crinkle at the side as he peers down at me. I roll my eyes, realizing his tactic to make me smile worked.

"Sounds good, but I'm hitting the shower first," Milo agrees, his stance finally more relaxed.

"I need to make a few calls, then I'll be right up." Ares tilts his head in the direction of our room upstairs.

Ollie keeps his arm over my shoulders and turns us. I glance behind me and watch Dante walk over to his brother while I allow Ollie to take me upstairs.

Ares watches me go; his eyes are clear and his face is soft. He's not hiding anything from me. I think any reluctance I sensed was just them being worried about me and how I would feel about Wyatt's condition. Dante leans his butt on the counter next to Ares, his hands going behind him to grab the edge, making his shoulders bunch up. It's easy to see the resemblance between them when they're standing together.

"What movie do you want to watch?" Ollie pulls my attention back to him.

I gather my thoughts. “Uh, how about you pick?”

“Nu-uh, not this time. I want you to pick—and don’t just pick something you think we want to watch.” He tightens his grip in a sideways hug then releases me to head up the stairs.

Ollie bangs on the closed bathroom door as we pass, where we can hear the shower is already running. “We’re going to pick a movie. Hurry up.” I hear Milo’s muffled response but can’t quite make it out. Ollie gives the door another pound.

I climb on the bed while Ollie grabs the remote for the television. Milo mounted it on the wall a few days ago. Their gaming system is sitting on a small cardboard box beneath it.

The noise of someone bounding upstairs draws my attention to the door. Dante pauses when he reaches the threshold. I have a flashback of when Ollie was standing there, when it was Dante and I in the bed. My face flushes hot as I look away. Does Dante know Ollie was there? Should I tell him? I glance at Ollie, but he’s preoccupied with the TV.

Dante eventually makes his way over and throws himself on the bed next to me. “What did you pick?”

“Muenster needs to pick,” Ollie informs him, finding the right app for movies.

“I have no idea.” I sigh. “It’s not like I kept up to date on what was out. Can’t you just pick something?”

Ollie blinks at me, his eyes narrow. “You like to read, right? You used to always be in the stairway with a book. How about the Harry Potter movies? I haven’t read the books, but the movies are pretty damn good.”

I jerk my head in a nod. That actually sounds awesome. I have always wanted to see those. “Yes, perfect.”

“Those are pretty good, I don’t think I’ve seen them all.” Dante settles back and folds one arm behind his head.

“Should we wait for Ares and Milo?”

“Nah, Ares could be a while, and Milo should be out in a few minutes. I heard the water shut off when I came in.” Dante grabs my hand with his and lays it over his chest.

I lean back against the pillow, excited for the movie, but even more excited about spending a few hours curled between my guys.



I'M the first one to wake. I did make it through the entire first movie. I'm sure it was thanks to the little catnap I had before Dante came in the room earlier. Plus, the movie really was good—not as good as the book, but better than I expected.

I climb over Ares, and he lets out a soft snore before clasping my hip, but his hand falls away almost immediately, and he's already back asleep. I snag his phone from the floor beside the bed before heading to the bathroom to take care of my morning business.

Downstairs, I hit the button to start up the single cup brewer—Ares and I are the only ones who drink much coffee. Ollie will occasionally have a cup, but not very often. He and the other guys seem to prefer soda.

While the coffee pot is heating up, I pick up Ares's phone. The screen comes to life. I flick my thumb up from the bottom of the screen to unlock it. Checking the time, I see it's much too early to call or text Rosa for an update on Mom. But it doesn't stop me from opening the texting app so I can see if Ares was talking to her last night.

Mia's name is at the top of the most recent conversation. It sends a shot of anger through me. She needs to figure out how to back off. I scan the messages, but it seems I might have jumped to conclusions too soon. Her texts seem to be mostly her updating Ares about work stuff, there are a few *how-are-you* and *let-me-know-if-you-need-anything* messages, but Ares's responses are almost chilly in return, mostly one-word answers.

I tap the back button to see the other threads of conversations. Mal's name is right under Mia's. I click it, but it looks like the last text was from yesterday afternoon before they showed up at Leon's.

The gurgling from the coffee machine warming has gone quiet, so I place the phone on the card table and grab a big mug from the cupboard. While I'm waiting for the coffee to brew, I look around. There's still a lot of work that needs to be done, but I can't wait until we have some real furniture. Even the crap we had at the camper would be better than these lawn chairs and fold-up tables at this point.

A bang downstairs has me almost jumping out of my skin. I steady my hands on the counter, ready to run upstairs. My first thought is Leon, but just as quickly I remember he's dead. I killed him.

Another loud bang sounds. "Dante," I holler. With my legs a little wobbly, I sneak into the living room.

"Laura?" he calls down, his voice gruff.

“Why are you yelling?” Ollie snaps.

“Shut up,” Dante demands. “Laura.” I hear his feet hit the ground and the pounding of his steps as he rushes downstairs.

“What’s going on?” Milo’s muffled voice calls down as I see the top of Dante’s head.

I hold my finger up to my lips, my eyes wide. “Shush,” I caution. “Someone’s outside.” Dante slinks down the stairs, his eyes already alert. I look out the front window and see a blue van coming up the driveway. Rudd Construction is labeled along the side. “Shit.” My shoulders fall and I turn around, feeling guilty.

Milo and Ollie are on the stairs. Ollie is wiping his eyes like he’s trying to hold them open. “What is it?” he mock whispers.

“Nothing. I panicked,” I confess. “It’s just the guys from yesterday. I didn’t think about them coming back today.”

Dante makes his way over to me and cups his hands over my shoulder. “Are you okay?” he studies my face.

“It just took me by surprise. I’m okay now,” I tell him, which is the truth.

After a few long seconds, he pulls me in close for a quick hug then releases me just as quickly. “I need to piss,” he murmurs, then groans while stretching his arms over his head and turning to head down the hall. Ollie is grinning at me when I pull my gaze from Dante’s backside. He wiggles his brows.

I puff out my cheeks and roll my eyes, not in the least bit concerned that I got caught ogling him.

Milo steps down off the bottom riser. “I should probably go open up the garage for them; I kind of forgot they were coming today, too.”

Milo makes his way through the kitchen to the door, not bothered that he’s only in a loose pair of gym shorts. Not that he has anything to be ashamed of, but he’s usually more reserved.

“I smell coffee,” Ollie announces, his nose in the air.

“Dang it.” I rush back to the kitchen. My coffee is too cold now, I like it piping hot.

Ollie wraps his hand around my wrist when I move to put the cup in the microwave. “I’ll take this one, I like iced coffee better anyway. This way, the ice won’t melt so much.”

I release the mug to him and grab another from the cupboard. The hum of the garage door opening from downstairs fills the room as Dante lumbers into

the kitchen. He heads straight for the fridge and pulls out the clear carton of eggs.

“Anyone want some eggs?”

I grab the carton from his hand, remembering the last time he tried to feed us half-cooked eggs. “I got it; you want scrambled?”

Dante shrugs his heavy shoulders. “Whatever is easier. I don’t care. I’m just hungry.”

“Ollie, you want any?”

“Sure, I’ll make some toast,” he offers.

“Grab me one of those bigger mixing bowls, please.” I point to the top of the cabinet where there’s a stack of brightly colored bowls. Dante grabs the stack, taking out one of the dishes nested inside.

“Don’t you want to drink your coffee first?” he asks, holding the yellow bowl out to me.

“I can do both if you grab me the creamer.” I bat my lashes at him. He looks down at me, momentarily stunned. It’s nice to see that I can affect them the way they can affect me.

“Got it.” Ollie hands me the carton of creamer, and I can hear the smirk in his tone.

“Milo, eggs?” I inquire as soon as he opens the door from the stairs while I am pouring the heavenly liquid into my mug.

“Ah, yeah.” He looks around. “I’m going to run and get dressed, then be right back to help.” He doesn’t linger in the kitchen.

“Wake up the Dark Lord,” I call up after him.

“The Dark Lord has already risen,” Ares drawls from the hallway.

“You’re sneaky,” I accuse, my eyes narrowing on him over my mug.

“I can’t help it if you ignore my presence,” he retorts, his chin tipped up in a regal manner. A grin tugs at my lips. His hair is a bit of a mess, and I can see little red lines on his cheek from the pillow. He looks completely removed from the moniker I’ve dubbed him with his pretend air of arrogance.

“Breakfast?” I arch my brow at him.

“Why are you all up so early?” he bemoans with a slight snarl.

“I got up early, but I woke them up when I thought someone was downstairs.” I wave my hand at Ollie, who’s leaning against the counter near the toaster, and Dante, who’s milling about the kitchen.

“Why didn’t anyone wake me up?”

“Really?” I set my mug down and start cracking eggs. “Nobody likes

waking your crabby butt up.”

“I am not crabby.” Ares scowls. Ollie makes a snorting sound. I just finish what I’m doing, ignoring them.

“Well, I can only assume everything is fine downstairs, or we wouldn’t all be standing around waiting for breakfast.” Ares moves to the coffee maker.

“It was the crew from yesterday, it slipped everyone’s minds that they would be back today after...” Dante lets the sentence trail off.

“So, what’s the plan for today?” I ask quickly, before Ares can ask why I freaked out and woke them up.

“I didn’t make any, I figured you’d want to go over and see your parents.” Ares leans against the counter. It’s his turn to watch me over his mug.

It’s strange to hear the word *parents* and have it be associated with me. I’ve never had parents, just a mom. “Should we give them a little time to get... reacquainted?” I’m probably just stalling, but I think I’ve earned the right. I’ve had a crazy few months. Finding out that my mom had a stalker, and that my dad isn’t really dead, is only the tip of the iceberg. I mean, I’m standing in the kitchen with three, make that four, of my partners.

Milo enters the kitchen in a fresh pair of joggers and a light gray t-shirt. “How can I help?”

“Grab some plates and silverware,” I direct him with a wave of my hand.

“I don’t know if we should wait,” Ares continues, as if Milo didn’t interrupt the conversation. “I’ll talk to Mamma, see what she thinks.”

I let out a heavy breath. “That sounds good. Maybe we could get going on some of the stuff up here since we don’t have to worry about...” I can’t bring myself to say his name.

The room falls quiet. Dante is the first to speak as he sidles up close to my side while I’m beating the eggs vigorously. He places his hand over mine, halting my movements.

“What room do you think we should start on?” he asks, his voice completely normal, as he ignores the fact that we’re dealing with much more important shit than a house remodel. And I love him for it.

“I was thinking the living room and kitchen. Sleeping upstairs isn’t so bad. I’d like a real table, a place to sit that isn’t a folding chair. And the kitchen will probably take the longest, right?” I glance over my shoulder at the rest of them.

Ollie is placing two pieces of bread in the toaster. “We’re sure we don’t want to just start over, build what we want?”

I shake my head in denial. “I like it here, it’s cozy.” And I just don’t know how much more change I can handle right this second. “I mean, unless you guys hate it.” My opinion shouldn’t be the only one that matters.

Ollie leans his butt against the counter and crosses his arms over his chest. “I’m fine with staying here for a while, but I still like the idea of building, too. It would be ours, we could each have a say in it.”

Milo walks over to Ollie and stands so their arms are touching. “Why don’t we decide after we get some of the work done here? Then we’d know if we wanted something more,” he suggests. I can deal with that. I would at least have a little more time to adjust.

“Agreed,” Dante pipes up. “Are we cooking or what?” I let out a small giggle. I think he would say anything if it meant he got to eat sooner.

CHAPTER 22

“*I* need to go out for a few hours,” Ares announces. “Dante, you feel like coming along?” Dante jumps up from the bed, he looks positively thrilled. He’s been lumbering around for the last hour. The constant banging and hammering is getting to all of us, but it seems to be bothering him the most. It is easy to understand, considering his ears are probably the most sensitive.

“Where are we going?”

“I have to meet Mia to sign a few papers, and I thought we’d stop by the house, see how everything is going.”

Mia’s name catches my interest. “Everything okay at work? I know we’ve kept you kinda busy.”

“Fine, though it’s been a little bit of an adjustment for everyone. I’ve always been very hands on, but my taking a step back is good for everyone.” Ares slides his hands into his pockets.

“You don’t talk about work much,” I prompt.

“Not much to talk about.” He shrugs with indifference.

“I don’t know about that.” I let the topic die and question, “What about us? Are we going back to school tomorrow? I don’t even remember what day it is.” I mumble the last part.

“I guess we could.” Ollie sounds completely unhappy about the prospect. I pat his shoulder.

“What’s the matter? Don’t you want to go back to waking up early and doing homework?” I tease.

Ollie throws his head back and lets out a long moan. “Please stop reminding me. Let’s wait until next week at least.” He looks up at me with a

hopeful twist to his lips.

“It’s the middle of the week,” Milo comments from the end of the bed.

“We’ll only be gone for a few hours. If you need anything, just call.” Ares comes over to the side of the bed and plants a kiss on my lips. I blink up at him so I don’t have to see anyone else’s reaction to his open affection.

Dante stoops and rolls his forehead against mine, before brushing his lips over mine gently. “What about me?” Ollie lifts his pursed lips in the air and makes smooching noises.

Milo swats his leg. “See you guys in a bit,” he calls to their retreating backs. I pretend to find the TV very interesting, still avoiding their gazes.

I hear the door slam closed, and seconds later Ollie flips over on his stomach and eyes me. I can feel his stare. His head turns and I know he’s looking at Milo. “All alone. Whatever shall we do?”

A shiver of excitement bubbles up in my stomach. I watch Ollie out of the corner of my eye as he crawls over to Milo, who’s still sitting on the edge of the bed with a game controller in his hands.

My lips part as I watch Ollie run his palm over Milo’s back. Milo’s shoulders roll in response. I can still hear the clang and pounding of the men downstairs, but it’s the first time in a while the noise falls into the background.

Ollie places a kiss behind Milo’s ear, then looks over his shoulder. He knows he has my attention. I don’t bother trying to pretend he doesn’t. “What do you say to a cheese sandwich?” he purrs into Milo’s ear loud enough that I hear him.

I let out a disgruntled groan and toss a pillow at his head. “Oliver. You’re so ridiculous.” He falls on the bed next to Milo and chuckles. He props his head up on his palm and gives me a once over with his teeth biting into his plump bottom lip. It’s a sin his lips are so gorgeous.

“You don’t like my approach, or the idea itself? Because I gotta tell ya, having you all warm and wanting between him and me sounds like the best fucking idea ever... literally.” He grins. It’s like he can’t refrain from being silly.

I roll my eyes, a smile blossoming on my lips. Milo turns around, and he eyes me and Ollie in turn, then tosses the remote to the side of the bed. Catching me by surprise—and Ollie, too, by the look on his face—Milo leans down and seals his lips onto Ollie’s. He reaches up and grabs my ankle, dragging me down the bed. I let out a startled yelp when my back hits the

mattress.

Milo lifts his face away from Ollie. “Did I hurt you?” The pressure of him holding my ankle lessens.

“No,” I reply a little breathlessly. He prowls over me, his face drawn in concentration. Milo dips his head, his lips still damp from kissing Ollie, to capture mine. I arch my neck to get closer to him as he cages me in his arms.

“Best idea ever.” Ollie scoots over and brings his face closer to ours, I feel the tip of his tongue under my bottom lip. Milo and I both turn our faces so Ollie is included in the kiss. After a few seconds, I need to catch my breath, my heart is beating so fast.

I pull back and watch Milo palm the back of Ollie’s head and deepen the kiss. My heart gives a solid thud against my ribcage as I watch Ollie melt against Milo.

Not breaking the kiss, Milo reaches for me with his free hand to pull me closer to them. I like seeing this side of him—he’s more confident, more real, more himself. Ollie’s head is tilted to the side, so his neck is fully exposed. I take the opportunity to plant small open-mouthed kisses there while his lips are still against Milo. I kneel so I can reach him better and Ollie wraps his arm around my waist. Milo’s hand caresses up my back until his fingers reach my hair. With a quick tug, he lifts my face and Milo’s lips meet mine. Ollie shifts beside me until I feel him kneeling behind me, his lips now trailing across the nape of my neck as his hands clasp my hips.

The feeling of being surrounded by them is almost dizzying. My mind can’t decide if I should focus on Milo’s lips and tongue, or the way Ollie’s hands are starting to wander over my lower stomach. Milo brings his body closer to mine until Ollie’s hand is sandwiched between us. At that moment, I decide not to worry about whose hand is where or whose lips I’m kissing, and just live in the moment.

Milo pulls his lips away from mine, and I peer up at him. The light ring of blue around his pupil is bright as he gazes down at me with his heavily lidded eyes. His gaze darts to the side where Ollie is still kissing up my neck. My heart kicks against my ribs with excitement as Ollie lifts his lips from my neck and lays his chin on my shoulder. The only sound in the room is our mingling breaths.

The anticipation between us is almost palpable. I swallow, my mouth feeling dry. With slow, deliberate movements, Milo reaches for the hem of my shirt, his eyes on mine, questioning. I nod my acceptance. Ollie’s fingers

brush my spine when he grabs the back of my shirt. They lift in unison and I raise my arms over my head as the shirt slips off, leaving me in just my pale blue bra.

Ollie's fingers trace over my shoulder and fall to the clasp in the middle of my back, where he doesn't hesitate in unclipping it. I lower my arms as the fabric droops, and Milo drags it the rest of the way off, leaving it forgotten on the edge of the bed.

I reach forward and tug on the bottom of Milo's shirt, so they know I want theirs off, too. Ollie shifts behind me, and I watch his shirt go sailing over the side of the bed. A wave of his heat hits me like a blast from a furnace, and my nipples pebble as gooseflesh covers the back of my arms.

Milo takes his time removing his shirt, his eyes locked on mine as he drags the fabric over his head from the back of his neck. When his head pops free, his hair is a little messy, and it just adds to his appeal. My eyes roam over his chest and shoulders. Milo's muscles are tightly packed, but he still isn't bulky. I dance my fingers from his collarbone down and over his chest, then bump over his impressive abdominals.

Ollie tucks himself close to my back. He reaches over my shoulder and places his hand on the back of Milo's neck, dragging him closer and squeezing me between them. My breath leaves me in a huff as they share a kiss right over my shoulder. This close, I can see the side of Ollie's tongue as he slides it in Milo's mouth. An ache forms low in my belly.

I bring my hands up and run my fingers over Milo's back, his shoulders roll a little and he lets out a low groan. Ollie's fingertips skate over my sides and his skin warms even more against my back.

I turn my head and place a kiss on the side of Ollie's neck. He pulls back from Milo and shifts to my side, placing his mouth against mine. He curls his tongue past my lips, teasing me, then pulls back. I lean forward trying to catch his mouth, but I'm pinned against Milo's chest. I feel the smile on Ollie's lips as he dips back close to me and brushes his lips over mine.

"So many things I want to do," Ollie mutters, as another blast of heat fills the room. Milo shoves Ollie's shoulder, so he falls back against the mattress. Ollie's eyes go a little round, but soften almost immediately. "There he is." Ollie licks his lips. "See, not so fragile."

"Shut up," Milo demands, but there's no heat to his words. He reaches for me, his hands skimming over the tips of my nipples as he makes his way to the waistband of my leggings. Milo's eyes meet mine and he cocks his brow,

asking permission. I nod, not really sure how this will work between the three of us. I know Milo and Ollie haven't been together, but that was before, when Milo was reluctant to be with anyone, before we slept together.

Milo slides his hands around my back, his fingertips going under the material of my pants at my hips. Ollie lifts up on his elbow and watches, his eyes glued to Milo's hands as he drags the fabric down my thighs. I lift my left knee so he can get the bunched-up material the rest of the way down, but Milo skims his hand back up to my waist and lifts me, so my head is above his. "Little help, Oliver," Milo whispers. I lean down and kiss Milo softly. His gruffness with Ollie is almost sweet, in a strange way.

Ollie works the fabric over my bent knees, tugging it off my feet. I feel his palms slide up the back of my thighs as he cups my bare ass. I don't know if it was Milo's intention to take my panties with my pants, but that was the result.

Ollie lines himself up against my back again. His jeans feel rough against my sensitive skin, but I love the heat and warmth that comes with him. Ollie slides his hands down behind my knees and pushes my legs up to wrap around Milo's abdomen. No longer able to focus on the kiss with Milo, I pull away and gaze down at him, my eyes heavily lidded.

Milo makes a hissing noise as Ollie presses himself to my back, his eyes go a little wild before he leans down and kisses his way down my chest to my breasts. My head falls back but Ollie's there to catch me. His hands skate over my hips and skin until he guides his fingers between mine and Milo's bodies. Our skin is slick with sweat, Ollie is throwing off so much heat.

Milo loosens his hold on my waist, and I slide down his body until my knees hit the mattress again. I glance up, wondering what's coming next. Ollie leans over my shoulder and places a soft kiss on Milo's lips. The muscles in my lower abdomen tighten in response. I move out from between them, and Milo reaches for Ollie and hauls him closer until every inch of their bodies are flush from knees to chest. Ollie glides his hands up Milo's arms and shoulders. Milo angles his head to deepen the kiss as he crowds even closer to Ollie, almost bending him backwards a little in the process.

If the small sound Ollie lets out is any indication, he seems to like the fact that Milo doesn't seem to be holding himself back. I settle myself on the mattress next to them, but I can't seem to tear my eyes away from them. Is this what it was like for Ollie earlier when he was watching me with Dante?

Milo's hands glide up Ollie's arms until he reaches just above his

shoulders, then he drags his lips away from Ollie, but doesn't pull back. Instead, he places his forehead against his and breathes deeply. His shoulders are relaxed, but I can still see the muscles of his back and biceps flex with each breath.

Ollie opens his eyes and he spies me off to the side. Watching them. "Where do you think you're going, Muenster?" His voice is husky.

"Nowhere." I shake my head to reinforce my words.

"That's right." Ollie pulls away from Milo and crawls over to me. His eyes are eating up my body without an ounce of shame. Ollie pushes his lips against mine then pulls back only to drive right back in with a little more force this time. I either have to grab his shoulders to stay seated, or let him nudge me until I'm lying beneath him. I have no complaint about either.

So, I do both. I wrap my arms around his neck and let him guide me back to the bed. Ollie hovers over me, his lips still teasing against mine. His fingertips shake a little as he skates them over my side. When he pulls away, he glances over his shoulder. I watch his neck bob as he swallows thickly.

"Where are you going?" There's an urgent edge in Ollie's tone.

"I'm not leaving, if that's what you think." Milo's voice comes from across the room. I was so ensnared by Ollie, I had no idea he had even gotten up. I hear a rustling sound then Ollie breathes out a long sigh.

"Thank fuck," Ollie mutters under his breath, only loud enough for me to hear. I bite my lip to hold in the smile forming on my lips. Ollie doesn't bother to hide his grin. Instead, he smiles down at me, his eyes dancing. "Where was I—oh yeah, right about here?" He rocks his hips against me. My eyes fall closed.

The bed shifts, and when I open my eyes, Milo is right next to us. He licks his top lip and his eyes are focused where Ollie's and my hips are meeting. It's then I notice the foil packet pinched in his fingers. I reach my arm over to him, the back of my knuckles brushing against his tightly packed abdominal muscles, making him breathe in on a hiss. He looks at me, his pupils blown wide. I wrap the tips of my fingers over the waistband of his joggers and tug them down a bit.

Ollie keeps his hips rocking against mine. I love the feel of him, but his jeans need to come off too. Milo swallows and glances over at Ollie. He drops the condom to the bed and pushes his pants and boxer briefs down his legs, adjusting until he gets them off.

Milo's erection bobs free; it's thick, just like the rest of his body. I wrap

my fingers around him, and his head falls back on his shoulders, but he knee walks over to get even closer to us.

Ollie leans over me, his palm hitting the mattress on the other side of Milo, not missing a beat as he rocks against me. Then, he rises up on his knees, his free hand moving to the button on his jeans. I work my hand over Milo while watching Ollie remove his pants.

Ollie snags the condom off the bed with a smirk on his lips. Milo reaches over and brushes his fingers over my nipple, drawing my attention. His lips are parted, his chest heaving with each stroke. Ollie reaches for my wrist. I glance up at him as he tugs my hand free from Milo and draws it up close to his face. He looks up at Milo and gives him a wink before licking my palm. I furrow my brow as he guides my hand right back to Milo.

I wrap my fingers around him again, the moisture on my hand making my fingers glide over him a little easier. Milo lets out a groan. Ollie lowers his head and kisses me briefly, before working his mouth lower over my chin and neck, then down to my breasts.

This time when he rocks against me, I don't feel the roughness of his pants, just his hot skin against mine. Milo inches even closer. He's so close I can barely move my arm to work from root to tip. But another idea forms. He's close enough that I could lick him if he moved up near my shoulder a little more.

Ollie settles his hips against mine, and I can feel the tip of him near my center. Ollie sucks on my nipple—hard—before popping free. He puts one palm against the bed and uses his other hand to guide himself into me. My entire body softens, my hand falls away from Milo, and my back arches while Ollie slides inside me.

Ollie groans when his hips are flush against mine. I open my eyes; it's hard to see Milo with Ollie over me, but I can see his lower stomach next to us. I watch as his hand comes up and wraps over his own cock. His grip is tight as he twists his way up to the tip, and a tiny bead of moisture seeps out. I crane my neck and turn my shoulder to dart my tongue over the slit. Milo's abdomen contracts hard.

Ollie sits up farther, changing the angle, but still manages to keep himself deep inside of me. Milo inches himself closer, his hand running over my forehead and into my hair. I take him between my lips just as Ollie pulls out of me and slides back in slowly.

Milo palms my breast with his other hand, pinching my nipple. The

combined sensation of having them both touching me is almost too much. Ollie starts up a heady rhythm while I lick and suck Milo.

My body tightens around Ollie, and I moan. Milo lets out a hiss of pleasure, so I don't hold back my sounds, as muffled as they are, since he seems to be enjoying it. Ollie grabs my hips and lifts me, while he shifts so he's kneeling between my legs. It allows me to see Milo better, and he runs his eyes and hands greedily over my body. With Milo in my mouth and Ollie between my legs, I can't do much but hold on as Ollie starts rocking against me harder. I wrap my hand around Milo's base; I don't even try to fit him all the way in my mouth. His head falls back on his shoulders, and the tendons in his neck stand out as he gasps for breath.

Ollie's fingers are bruising on my hips as he drags me even closer. His thumb slides over my lower stomach and brushes across the top of my pubic bone. It feels like fire just licked my skin, but there's no pain, just heat. He works his thumb even lower, and my mouth falls open around Milo when I feel Ollie brush across my clit. Milo pushes deeper into my mouth.

I tighten my lips around him as Ollie circles me with his thumb, my knees squeezing against Ollie's sides as my back goes rigid. Milo pumps into my mouth a few times then jerks himself away from me. My hand is still wrapped around his base as he turns to the side. He brings his hand up over his tip and lets out a long, low moan. I can feel his cock jerking as he comes into his own hand.

I look up at Ollie, his eyes are on Milo, and he's biting his lip and breathing hard. He looks down at me with a smile blossoming on his lips. "Fucking amazing." He drops his lips to mine and slides his tongue in my mouth. I melt under him. This feeling of him fully against me—even though his chest and stomach are almost too hot—I love it. I pull my knees up higher on his waist. Ollie braces his hands on the outside of my shoulders and starts to move his lower body like he's dancing. His hips swivel and rock, all while he's still pushing in and out of me. I break the kiss, my head falling back to the bed as Ollie licks up my throat and kisses the side of my neck.

I groan when I feel another set of hands brush up the back of my thigh. The combined touch is all it takes, my body starts to spiral, the pleasure building until I'm almost desperate for a release.

Milo's fingers brush against where Ollie and I are connected. Ollie stills over me; his eyes are a little wide as he pushes back into me slowly. He closes his eyes. His face is a little pinched, but his lips part and he lets out a

heavy sigh. My legs start to tremble, warmth pooling in my stomach. I claw at Ollie's back, pulling him tighter against me while I swivel my hips under him. His eyes pop open, and he gets back to his steady rhythm. "Got distracted, Muenster. Sorry," he tells me, then really puts some effort into showing me what I was missing.

Within seconds, I'm ready to fall over the edge. Just as a soft moan starts to leave my lips, Ollie reaches down and grabs my ankle, and places it over his shoulder. When he rocks back into me, he's somehow deeper. That move takes my orgasm up another notch, and my body goes rigid as I let the euphoria take me. This feeling—the closeness and the intimacy—is addictive.

Ollie's pace speeds up until he's panting for breath. He throws his head back, the cords in his neck standing out as his jaw clenches. After several long seconds, he peers down at me, his eyes a little droopy with a contented smile teasing at the corners of his lips. I reach up and brush his hair away from his cheek. Ollie leans into my touch and lets a little more of his weight fall against me.

The bed next to us shifts as Milo rests his face right above my breast and wraps his arm around Ollie's back, so he's cuddled in close to us. Ollie shifts, and he slides free of my body, making me wince. I hate that feeling. "I'll be right back." He bounces up with way more energy than I could muster at the moment. I hear the water turn on in the bathroom. True to his word, he's back in seconds with a damp towel.

When he slides it up the inside of my thigh, I yelp and shrink away. It's freezing. "Oops, sorry about that." Ollie holds the cloth in his hands for a second, warming it up, then places it back on my leg. After a brief cleanup, he tosses the cloth to Milo. "Got a mess you need to take care of?" he teases.

Milo catches it in his hand and holds up Ollie's shirt with the other. "I'm all good actually." He raises his brow in challenge, then tosses both items on the floor. Ollie makes a scoffing sound then chuckles. I roll my eyes at both of them. They're too adorable.

CHAPTER 23

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” Ares is holding me by the tops of my shoulders, studying my eyes.

I nod and answer, “I need to see them, Ares. It’s been days.”

“There’s no rush,” he offers again. I know there isn’t, but I’ve been hiding out in the house for three days. Those days have been filled with stolen kisses and soft caresses from most of the guys, and I’ve thoroughly enjoyed every moment, but it’s time to deal with my parents.

“I know, but we need some normalcy. You need to work, and we need to get back to school. I need to see and know what’s happening.” Dante told me Wyatt is already improving physically, but we haven’t really talked about mentally. I think his improvement is something I need to see for myself anyway. Every time I think about him, I imagine him under that white sheet, so frail and thin that it looked like his bones would snap if he tried moving.

I shake those thoughts away and gaze up at Ares. The other guys are already waiting outside for us. Ares made an excuse to keep me behind. I lean up on the tips of my toes and place my lips softly against his. “I miss you,” I mutter against his mouth.

He slides one hand up and cups the front of my throat, applying a light pressure. “What exactly are you missing, *Cara*? I’ve been right here.” His warm breath falls over my lips seductively.

“This. You. Are you mad at me?” I meet his eyes from under my lashes.

His hand tightens infinitesimally. “No, why would you think that?” His head tilts to the side.

“You’ve barely touched me since... well, since we were at your old place, then the stuff with Leon happened...” I look down, but Ares catches

my chin with his free hand.

“I just wanted to give you time to process. You’ve had a lot of shit to deal with. I don’t want you to feel like we’re another obligation.” Ares licks his bottom lip then scrapes his teeth over it.

“You’re never something I have to deal with.” I reach up and run my hands over his vest, then up until the tips of my fingers hit the smooth fabric of his slate gray dress shirt. He steps in a little closer, the front of his shoes touching mine. His hand stays on my neck, while the other skims down over my side until his fingers curl around my hip. “I need this from you,” I whisper, as he ghosts his lips over my cheek.

Ares sighs near my ear, and I close my eyes, enjoying his nearness. Ares isn’t one to back off, and I don’t want him to start now. “Good to know.” Ares slides his hand around the back of my neck and tugs me to his chest. He holds me there for several moments. I rub my cheek against the soft material of his shirt and relax into his embrace.

Footsteps on the stairs alert me that someone is coming. I don’t pull back from Ares, so I feel it when he turns his head to look over his shoulder. “You guys coming?” Ollie huffs a little from rushing up the flight of stairs.

“Yeah, coming,” I call, patting Ares’s chest so he’ll release me.

“We’re not in a hurry.” There’s a little censure in Ares’s voice. He’s speaking to Ollie.

“I know, I just wanted to make sure everything was okay.” Ollie widens his hands in surrender.

“It’s okay,” I tell Ares, and snag his fingers to pull him with me. I smile over at Ollie to let him know everything is, indeed, fine. “I just needed a minute with the Dark Lord.” Ollie groans.

“Don’t call him that. Look at him now.” Ollie gestures his hand over to Ares’s face. I glance up and watch as he smothers the grin that was lifting his lips. His brows lower as he glares at Ollie with mock anger.

Feeling better already about the whole situation, I push Ollie’s shoulder. “Come on, you’re taking forever.”

Ollie’s mouth drops open as he shares a look with Ares. “I see how it is, everything is always my fault.”

“Now you’re getting it,” Ares mumbles jokingly, and starts for the stairs. I blow Ollie a kiss over my shoulder and follow Ares downstairs. My heart is a little lighter after the exchange.

Dante is behind the wheel of the suburban we’ve been using more and

more. “You’re not driving?” I look over at Ares, surprised.

“It doesn’t look like I am,” he drawls, and opens the rear door for me to slide in. I hit the button for the seat to fold down, but Ares places his hand over mine and stops me, returning the seat upright. “You can sit in the middle.” He nods his head at me.

That’s perfectly fine with me. Sitting cuddled between Milo and Ares sounds almost perfect. Milo lifts his arm and lays it over the back of the seat, giving me room. “Hey, you okay?” His dark blue eyes search mine.

“Fine.” I reach for my seatbelt while Ares is settling next to me. He looks around, like it’s the first time he’s been in the backseat—probably is.

“Ready?” Dante finds me in the rearview mirror, it makes me think of all the times I’ve ridden in his car.

“I’m good,” Ares announces, his knee lying against mine. I place my palm face up on his thigh, and he clasps his hand over mine immediately. Milo threads his fingers under my hair and cups my shoulder.

I’m nervous as hell to see my mom and Wyatt, but I know I won’t have to face it alone.



“HEY GUYS, I’m glad you all came!” Rosa greets us when we walk into the kitchen. Her eyes meet mine, and she gives me a wry smile while wiping her hands on a dish towel. “Mal made dinner, are you hungry?”

Dante lifts his nose in the air. “I’m always hungry. Roast?”

Rosa nods and looks over her shoulder to make sure no one is in earshot before bringing her hand up to cover half of her mouth. “Don’t tell him, but it was a little dry,” she whispers.

“It’s always dry, Mamma.” Ares grabs my hand before I have a chance to fidget too much.

“Are they in our old room, I mean Ares’s room?” I shake my head and thin my lips at the slip.

“Yes, Laura, they’re in your old room,” Rosa answers kindly.

Dante stops his journey into the kitchen. “You want some company?” he offers.

I glance around at all four of them and notice that each of them is waiting patiently for my response. I straighten my back and take a deep breath. I

don't know why I'm so worried; it's just my mom and my... her... whatever. "No," I croak. Clearing my throat, I try again. "No, I'll just check and make sure they aren't busy."

"Come on boys, come sit with me." Rosa wraps her hand around Ollie's forearm. "Tell me how the remodel is coming along." She looks over at Milo. I back up a few steps with the guys all still watching me like I might fall apart if I'm out of their sight. I brace my hands on my hips and give them a good glare, which has all of them pretending to focus on Rosa.

"I could go for some roast," Dante declares.

"Where is William?" Ares picks up an apple from a basket and sinks his teeth into the red flesh, chomping off a bite as his eyes linger on me without an ounce of hesitation.

"He's in the den, supposed to be working, but I heard him shouting at the TV. I think he's watching some game." Rosa waves her hand dismissively. Ares leans his elbow on the counter and raises one brow at me.

"I'm going," I snap, and turn on my heel. "Thought there wasn't a rush," I mutter under my breath.

I find the way to the room easily. It doesn't feel like that long ago I was cursing the size of this house and how I always got turned around. I remember the morning I ran into Mia after the first night I'd slept in Ares's bed. Raising my hand to knock on the door, I look over my shoulder expecting to find her standing there, judging me, but the hall is empty.

I rap on the door softly, almost hoping they don't hear me, so I have an excuse to run back to the kitchen. "Come in." My mom's voice is clear and soft.

I turn the knob slowly and peek my head around the door. I don't immediately see them, since the room is set up completely different from when it was Ares's.

"Laura?" I look over when she calls my name. Mom is sitting in a large chair near a wall of windows. The dark drapes are pulled back, letting the afternoon sunlight pour into the room. She sets down the book that was in her hands and stands up, before smoothing her hands down her hips. Her blonde hair is down in a shiny curtain, the darkness around her eyes is gone, and there's a flush to her cheeks.

"Mom?" My voice is small.

"Hey." She blinks several times and shifts her feet before her eyes dart off to the right. I follow her gaze and see a familiar, small lump under the

sheets. I flash back to the day at Leon's creepy house. My feet start to carry me backward without any thought.

My mom takes a step in my direction. Her mouth is moving, but I can't hear past the whooshing in my ears. The bathroom door opens and out walks a man. He's not wearing a shirt, so I quickly avert my eyes. A hand lands on my shoulder, and I flinch away. I look up to see my mom, her forehead wrinkled in confusion and a hurt look on her face.

"Laura." Her words register slowly. I glance over at the bed again, but the lump I thought I saw is just a few pillows mounded up.

"Yeah," I breathe. The man steps up behind my mom, placing his hands on her shoulders, and thankfully he's now wearing a green t-shirt.

My mom leans into his touch, but her face is still pinched. After giving her a quick squeeze, he steps around her and stands between us. I step backwards again and take in his appearance. He's taller than me by several inches. His cheeks still have a hollow look, but I can already see a huge difference from the last time I saw him. His eyes are clearer, but the blue color is still washed out.

"Thank you for saving me." His voice is surprisingly strong. I lick my lips, trying to swallow the lump in my throat. "Your mom has told me a lot about you, Laura."

I wrap my arms over my stomach and glance at my mom over his shoulder. "Like what?"

Wyatt looks over at my mom briefly. "She told me how smart you are, how hard you work. She's told me so much." His voice is a little breathy.

I peer over at Mom, somehow feeling a little betrayed that she told him about me, but she never told me about him. She opens her mouth, but snaps it closed quickly.

"Funny, she's probably told you more about me than she even told me about myself." I can't stop how snarky my words come out.

Wyatt glances between the two of us, his brow furrowed. He takes a step in my direction, and I notice his soft flannel pants are a little too baggy, so I know they aren't his. I lift my chin in the air, knowing by the way he looks at my mom he's probably going to defend her.

Instead, he asks, "How have you been? You didn't come by for a few days. Ares said you weren't ready." Wyatt's eyes study mine. I give him a small shrug, not sure what answer he's looking for. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you." Wyatt looks down at the ground, and when he looks back at me, his

lips are rolled in. I notice small freckles on his cheeks and forehead. I reach my hand up to the bridge of my nose like I might be able to feel the little dots that pop out over my own face during summer, then fade as the fall rolls around.

He mistakes my movement, inquiring, “Do you have a headache? Here, sit down.” He waves his hand toward a chair near the one my mother vacated.

I drop my hand and peer over at him from the side of my eye. I don’t think my mother ever showed that level of parental concern for me. “I’m fine.”

“Well, that’s good.” He deflates a little. “Are you staying for a while?” His shoulders rise a little as he looks at me with open hope on his face. “We could talk, catch up.” He rolls his eyes upward as soon as the words leave his mouth. “I would like to get to know you,” he adds, full of sincerity.

My mom steps closer to him and lays a hand on his shoulder. I look at her hand like it’s a foreign object. She’s so comfortable touching him. “What do you say? Have a seat?” he requests again when I don’t respond.

I stuff down the feelings of rejection and unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth. “Sure, okay.” I nod, knowing it will make him happy, and if anyone deserves happiness, it’s Wyatt. I angle my way around him and Mom until I’m near the two chairs. I look out the window and a small grin teases my lips. Leave it to Ares to hide the beautiful garden on the other side of the glass.

“What is it?” Wyatt asks, his head tilted to the side.

I motion to the windows. “I didn’t even realize that was there. Ares always had it closed up, and I never bothered to look.”

“This room is like a tomb, it took me forever to find the bathroom.” Wyatt’s eyes are a little brighter.

“And the closet,” I agree.

“I know.” The word comes out long. “It’s bigger than my whole room back home...or was...” He trails off. My mom takes a seat on the arm of his chair after Wyatt sinks into the cushion. He points at the side of his head. “Sometimes I forget how much time has passed since I’ve been home.” He says it simply, like it’s no big deal. “I didn’t grow up like this.” He looks around again and shrugs his shoulders a bit.

I snort. “It’s bigger than our whole house.” I thought he would laugh with me, but his brow furrows again, and he glances at my mom. She doesn’t meet his eyes.

“Mandy said you guys moved around a lot. That was smart. It must have been hard on you, though.”

I fold my hands together in my lap, my back ramrod straight in the cushy chair. “Changing schools and finding new jobs was hard sometimes,” I concede. I don’t know what else to say. It sucked. Big time. It was made more difficult because I was never allowed to have friends, but the worst was not knowing why we did any of it. I just thought my mom had a screw loose.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help you two.” Wyatt looks down at his hands. “I should have fought harder,” he mumbles under his breath. My mom rubs her hand over his shoulder, and Wyatt raises his head back up and tries for a smile, but it’s forced.

He scoots forward on the chair so his knees are only inches from mine. All traces of pretend humor are erased from his face. “You did what I couldn’t.” He stares at me like I’m some sort of enigma and miracle all rolled together.

I look down, a little ashamed at how easy it was for me to kill Leon. Not the fact that my abilities let me do it, more the remorse that I never even hesitated to do it.

I feel Wyatt touch my knee with the tip of his finger. “You’re so brave, so strong.” I scoot back into the seat, getting more and more uncomfortable. I look over at the door and swallow. Have I been here long enough? Can I go now without disappointing him?

Wyatt clears his throat. “Why don’t you tell me about your Infinity? Four, huh? I bet you’re a handful.” I peek at Wyatt from the side of my eye to see what he’s thinking, but he has a genuine grin on his face. His arms are tucked over his chest, and he’s leaning back in his seat, giving me more room.

“What do you mean?” I tilt my head to the side.

“Any Synergist who needs four partners has got to be pretty special.” He says it like he’s proud.

“That she is,” Ares announces, slinking into the room without a sound. I don’t even startle. I’m finally getting used to his shadowy ways.

“I always thought it was you guys who made me special,” I retort, saying what I’m thinking out loud. Ares makes a disbelieving sound and reaches for my hand, pulling me to stand.

“Whatever gave you that idea?” He lowers himself into my seat and tugs me by my waist to sit in his lap.

My face goes bright red. I can’t even look across at my mom and Wyatt.

Through my teeth, I say, “Maybe because I didn’t even know what I was until you guys told me.” My embarrassment lets a little of the anger I’m still feeling at my mother come out loud and clear.

My mom speaks up for the first time in a while. “I thought I was protecting you, Laura.”

I watch Wyatt from the corner of my eye when he turns to face my mom. “You didn’t tell her?” He sounds incredulous.

My mom shrinks a little and rubs her hands together. “I... I planned to tell her when she was older,” she defends.

“How old are you?” Wyatt shakes his head, his eyes going from left to right like he’s counting something in his head.

“I’ll be eighteen this month,” I answer.

Wyatt’s mouth drops open a little and his face goes slack. “But we manifest at sixteen. And her partners. How old are you?” he asks Ares.

“I’m twenty-three, the others are closer to Laura’s age.”

Wyatt adjusts in his seat so he can see my mother better. “How much older did you want her to be—thirty? Don’t you know what that would have been like for her, for them?” He waves his hand in our direction, but it’s almost like he’s forgotten we’re even in the room.

I tuck myself back a little closer to Ares, uncomfortable with where the direction of the conversation is going. My mom glances at me, but her attention goes back to Wyatt quickly. “I was trying to protect her. I didn’t want her to end up like me.” It’s the first time I’ve heard her snap at him. She stands, her hands balled into small fists.

“You think I don’t know I messed up? That I was totally self-absorbed? I let her go to school and work while I sat on my ass in that motorhome because I was scared. You think I don’t know that?” Mom’s eyes are wide, and unshed tears are brimming her bottom lashes. “I lived it,” she sneers. “Every day alone and afraid. Hating myself a little more each day, but useless to do anything to change it.” Guilt makes my shoulders sag. I don’t want to be the reason he’s mad at her.

Wyatt’s face softens and he stands up. “Mandy, I’m not judging you, but I need to understand,” he pleads with her.

Ares’s hand coiling into a fist should have been my first warning that something was about to happen. He’s always so calm and controlled, so I didn’t anticipate his reaction. “If you know, then why the fuck are you still doing it?” he barks, his voice dark.

I turn so I can see him. His face is grim: lips hard, jaw clenched. “Right now, you’re still making this about you.” He lifts his hand, his fingers spread wide as he gestures at my mother.

Her mouth drops open, and her head jerks back like she’s shocked by his statement. “You are still just thinking about yourself.” Ares enunciates each word slowly. His hands go to my arms and he braces me before standing. In the next second, he’s in front of me, blocking me from her. “Have you ever once even apologized for letting her be the one to take care of you, when it should have been the other way around? I’m not just talking about the lies and omissions here either. I’m talking about what she lived with every day.” He’s not full-out shouting, but the anger simmering in his voice might just be worse. I move to the side so I can see what’s happening. Wyatt is looking back and forth between Ares and my mom, he appears torn.

“I mean, she’s been working since she was thirteen, not because she wanted a phone or some shit. She was working to pay your bills, feed you,” Ares accuses.

Wyatt’s eyes bulge. “Wait a minute, wait.” He spreads his arms like he’s keeping my mom and Ares apart, but Ares hasn’t moved since he stood up. Turning his back to us, Wyatt says, “Mandy?” His voice is an incredulous whisper.

Mom snuffles, tipping her chin in the air. “He’s right. I can’t argue, because it’s true. I was a broken mess who faked it for a few years.” She lets out a self-deprecating laugh. “When that got too hard, I quit faking.” She doesn’t even attempt to defend herself.

I try to put myself in her shoes, to see how I would feel if I lost one of the guys, but the thought makes my stomach hurt. I reach for Ares’s arm. This isn’t going to help. Yes, I’m still mad. Yes, my heart still aches every time I see her give and accept affection, but this isn’t what I want.

Not quite done, Ares spews, “I get that what happened to you was fucked up—believe me, I get it—but she didn’t deserve your indifference.”

“Ares.” His eyes dart down to me. His top lip bunches up when he sees my face. “It wasn’t pretty, but we survived,” I tell him, with my eyes locked on his.

“No. You survived, she existed.” He tosses his hand in my mom’s direction. I can see the pent-up words simmering behind his lips. He wants to say so much more, but he doesn’t, and that’s for me. I wrap my hand around the side of his neck and give him an appreciative smile.

“That’s what you were keeping from her,” Wyatt utters softly, meaning the connection between Ares and me. “What we didn’t have the chance to explore before it was taken from us.” When I look over, he’s staring at my mom. The sadness on his face is as clear as the frown marring his features.

Mom brings her fist up to her mouth and closes her eyes. “I get it,” she whispers. “I get it.”

“I never knew what I was missing, but you kept it from them.” I find my voice, and then shake my head when I think about the years we’ve missed. I wonder how different things could have been when I first met the guys if I had actually known what I was.

But I can’t change it—can’t give back the two years we’ve lost—and neither can she. “I wish things could have been different for us, Mom,” I tell her around the lump in my throat. Because that’s one thing she could have changed. One thing I can’t understand.

If I lost Dante, or one of the others, I think I would do anything in my power to hold on to whatever piece of them I had left.

Her head lowers and I watch as her shoulders jerk a few times, but her sobs are silent. I think she’s perfected that. Never once did I see her cry, but the evidence was always there. Wyatt places his hand on my mom’s shoulder and that makes her shake even more.

Ares pulls me to his side. His voice is much more formal when he says, “I’m glad to see you are feeling better, Wyatt.” It’s clear he’s telling them goodbye. Wyatt opens his mouth, but then rolls his lips in and gives a small nod of his head.

Ares turns us and heads for the door. “Laura.” I look over my shoulder to see Wyatt. He’s still standing with my mom, but his eyes are trained on me. “I... I... thank you again. Could we... talk again?” His voice is small, unsure.

I feel Ares’s arm tighten on my shoulder. “Sure.” My smile is practiced; it’s the same one I mastered working as a waitress. Wyatt’s lips turn down in a frown. I don’t think he bought it as easily as most do.

“I would really like that,” he assures me. I give him a small wave and let Ares lead me from the room.

CHAPTER 24

Ares guides me down the hallway, farther into the house. At a loss for words, I walk beside him while my mind rehashes everything my mom said or didn't say over the last twenty minutes.

"Sorry I intruded," Ares murmurs when we reach a familiar door.

"You didn't," I assure him. "I was plotting my escape."

Ares opens the door that leads to the small sun porch I sat in weeks ago with Rosa. I glance around, noting the changes.

"Want to sit for a few?" Ares inquires.

"Sure." Lowering myself onto the small loveseat, I pat the brightly colored teal cushion. "This is new."

"Is it? You've been here before?" Ares takes the spot beside me and yanks down the bottom of his vest. His movements tell me he's only pretending to be calm.

"Yeah, this is where I ran the night you told me you were going out to see Leon's family." I look out into the yard. It's different than I imagined, more manicured. It would be nice to see something wild and unruly, but that wouldn't really fit with the rest of the house or the grounds. "What was it like growing up here?" I peer at Ares.

He clasps his hand over the arm of the sofa, his eyes narrowing a bit in thought. "It was good. Lonely, until Dante came along, but I didn't realize it until he was here, if that makes sense."

"I actually get that. I never realized how lonely I was until Dante and the guys started talking to me at school." I let out a small chuckle. "There were so many misunderstandings when we first met." Looking back, it feels like years ago instead of the mere months it's been.

Ares runs his hand over my shoulder after lifting his arm to the back of the couch. “They sure didn’t make things easy on themselves.”

“It wasn’t just them.” I give his side a little jab. He was involved in several misunderstandings between us all. Ares’s face is a mask of innocence, but he doesn’t argue.

After several long moments, Ares asks, “Do you want to talk about it?” I know he’s talking about what just happened with my mom and Wyatt, not the beginning of our relationship.

I heave out a sigh. “Is there really a point?” I let my eyes bounce around the yard, following a few birds as they dip in and out of the trees.

“There is if it will make you feel better,” he encourages.

“That’s just it. I don’t think it will.”

“We could try,” Ares suggests. “I know there’s a shit ton of stuff I want to say to her, ask her, but that would probably lead to a fight. Which I don’t mind, but I know you will.” Ares wraps his palm around the back of my neck.

“I mean, I have questions, but she’s just going to say she did it to protect me. That she thought what she was doing was best for us.” I shrug. “That’s all she ever says. So, what’s the point?”

“What about all the other stuff? Not just why she kept the Infinity knowledge from you?”

I pick at the seam of my jeans. That part makes me uncomfortable. “Maybe I don’t want to know the answer, because maybe it was me.” I had grabbed on to the excuse that something Leon had done to her had influenced her behavior toward me, but I now know that’s not true. Leon’s power just wasn’t that strong without re-exposure. “Whatever her reasons, it’s not like I can change it. Maybe it’s best not to overthink it. She already told me that being around me reminded her of what she lost.”

“How she treated you has nothing to do with you!” Ares brings his face close to mine and gives me a firm scowl. “And it doesn’t mean she should just get off the hook for being a shitty parent,” Ares growls.

“I don’t know if it’s really letting her off the hook, Ares. Wyatt appeared to have some questions of his own, and... it seems like she feels guilty.” I pluck a frayed part of my jeans, the small imperfection there by design, not because they’re old and ratty like I used to wear.

“I still think she’s getting off too easily. I can’t make sense of half her choices.” He still sounds pissed.

I reach over, drop my hand on his thigh, and curl into his side. A small contented sigh leaves my lips. “At least I’m here now; she might have never come back to Canton—”

Ares makes a shushing sound before I finish, wrapping his arm around me tighter. I feel his lips on the top of my head. “Thank fuck for that,” he mutters.

We spend several minutes in silence enveloped in the comfort of each other’s arms. “We should probably go find the guys,” I tell Ares, but nestle my head against his chest.

“We will,” he agrees, but neither one of us makes a move to get up.



ARES and I walk hand in hand into the kitchen. Milo and Ollie are sitting at the island with an open laptop between the two of them.

Dante is lounging on one of the sofas as a comedy plays on the TV with the volume down low. His eyes are trained in my direction before I even pass the threshold. He bounds up, studying me as he walks over, and drops his forehead on mine. Taking in a deep inhale, he grabs both of my wrists, not caring his brother is still holding one of my hands. “Let’s go home,” Dante says, telling me exactly what I want to hear.

Ares releases my hand. “Let me go tell Mamma,” he says, leaving me alone with the other guys. Ollie and Milo give us a few seconds of privacy, staying on the other side of the kitchen.

“You okay?” Dante’s eyes bounce around my face when he pulls back far enough to see me.

“I am,” I confirm. I still have a long way to go before my relationship with my mom is repaired, but I’m hopeful that we can fix it, especially now that she has Wyatt back in her life.

Milo comes over next. “How did it go?”

I take a step back from Dante so I can look at all three of them now standing near me. “Wyatt looks a lot better,” I hedge.

“Yeah, I noticed a difference right away. Being with your mom has really helped with his recovery.” Milo pushes his hand into the pocket of his joggers, tugging the waist down so I catch a glimpse of his flat tummy.

Averting my eyes so I don’t ogle him, I peer up at Ollie. “What were you

guys up to?” I hope the change of topic will go unnoticed.

“Not much, just checking out some stuff for the house.” Ollie gives a slight shrug. “How were things with your mom?”

Inwardly, I roll my eyes. So much for hoping they’d drop it. “Okay, I guess. She seems to be doing better physically, too. I’m sure it has to do with her being back with Wyatt,” I answer vaguely.

Ollie narrows his eyes on me, and I know he wants to press for more, but I don’t really feel like talking about it right now.

“So, school tomorrow?” I rock back on my heels a little and trade glances with the three of them.

That comment elicits a moan of disapproval from Ollie. “If you have your pretty little heart set on it, I guess we have to go.”

“It’s not that bad.” Milo drops his arm over Ollie’s shoulder. “We only have a few months left before graduation, and we have winter break coming up. Maybe we could try to go skiing again,” he adds with a hopeful note in his voice.

“Skiing.” Ollie wrinkles up his nose. “We should go someplace warm, someplace we could lie on the beach all day.”

Dante stays quiet during the exchange, his arm sliding around my back and his fingers grabbing my hip possessively. The idea of traveling doesn’t really sound that appealing to me. I feel like I’ve been living out of a suitcase my entire life.

“We could stay home.” I bite the corner of my lip. “Put up a Christmas tree, decorate the house.” I give a small shrug.

“I like that idea,” Dante murmurs, his deep voice finally adding to the conversation.

“What idea is that?” Ares walks toward our group with Rosa, William, and Mal all entering the kitchen behind him.

“Staying home for the school holiday,” Dante tells him.

Ares’s head tilts to the side. “Were we planning on going someplace?” His eyes find mine.

“Not really, just talking about it, but they’re right. Staying home will be perfect,” Milo answers before I can.

Rosa rubs her hands together, and she has a gleam in her eyes. “We don’t have much time to plan.”

Ares actually rolls his eyes, but his back is to his mom, so she doesn’t see. “Don’t plan some huge party in our honor.” He turns on his heel to face

her. Rosa's brows fall in disappointment. "You know we hate those things." He softens his words.

"I know," Rosa sighs. "Maybe just something small for Christmas Eve?" She looks at him hopefully.

"Of course, we'll be here," Ollie replies, giving Ares the side-eye.

"Just not all day," Dante adds.

Rosa waves her hand dismissively. "I know, I know," she promises, her eyes already going unfocused as she starts making plans in her head.

"You guys heading out?" Mal asks, leaning on the kitchen island.

"Yeah, we have school tomorrow." Ollie doesn't hide his contempt. William lets out a low chuckle.

"We'll probably be back in a day or two." Ares looks to me for confirmation. I nod, agreeing.

"That's good, I know Amanda and Wyatt would like that." Rosa opens her arms and wiggles her fingers, indicating she wants a hug. Milo is closest, so he makes his way over first. The rest of us each take our turn in her arms, when I move to release her, she holds on a little longer than usual, and gives me an extra squeeze.

Ollie snags my fingers in his as we make our way out to the car. "I get back," he calls like it's the premium seat choice.

"You driving?" Dante offers the key on his open palm to Ares. Milo is already around the car and opening the other rear door.

"I suppose," Ares affirms before pocketing the key.

I slide into the middle seat while Ollie gets settled beside me. "Do you guys want to do some shopping?" He leans forward so his head is between the two front seats.

"For what?" Dante sounds suspicious.

"Whatever, we could pick out the furniture for the living room. We're not changing much in there, right?" Ollie looks around for confirmation.

"It would be nice not to sit in lawn chairs," Milo pipes up. I wiggle in my seat a little. This actually sounds like it might be fun, plus, it will help me keep my mind off the last few hours.

"Come on, Laura wants to. Don't you, Muenster?" Ollie pleads with me, his puppy dog eyes on full display.

"It sounds fun," I reply with a smile.

Dante groans from the front seat. "You don't know what you just signed us up for." He slouches.

“I’ve been shopping with him before,” I mutter a little defensively.

Dante turns his head so he can see me in the backseat, and he gives me a lazy wink. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” His facial expression tells me that he’s just giving Ollie a hard time.

“Just for that, I’m not going to find what we want at the first store.” Ollie crosses his arms over his chest, his brows raised in a challenge.

“He’s just teasing you.” I pull Ollie’s arm down and fold my fingers over his. He purses his lips and glares at the back of Dante’s head.

“Where to?” Ares asks, when we reach the end of the driveway.

Ollie perks up then, all his attitude disappearing as he leans forward again. “Let’s check out that place over by the mall.”

“Wait—that new shop?” Milo questions. “Isn’t that store super stuffy?”

Ollie waves his hand dismissively at Milo. “I just want to see what they have.” Dante lets out another exaggerated groan from the front seat. I hide my grin behind my palm—at least I’m not trying on dresses this time.



THERE’S a woman in a fitted suit coat and matching skirt standing near the entrance. Her face is already plastered with a wide smile. “Hi, I’m Michelle. Are you looking for anything in particular today?” She roams her eyes over our large group, her smile never faltering.

Ollie gets pushed to the front. Dante and Ares stand on either side of me like hired bodyguards, or reluctant shoppers. Milo ends up somewhere between Ollie and us.

“We’re looking for something for our living room, nothing too formal.”

The saleswoman nods her head. “You guys are all roommates,” she concludes, as if she’d been wondering how we all fit together. “Let me show you some stuff I think you’ll like.”

She turns and begins walking deeper into the store. I follow along after the guys, running my hand over a few pieces of furniture. I haven’t seen anything that looks comfy yet.

“How much space do you have? Is it just the five of you in the house, four?” She looks at Ares, then at me. I think she thinks one of us doesn’t belong.

“Five,” Dante says, not missing a beat.

The woman's brows dip, but she recovers quickly. Slowing her steps, she waves her arm out to the right. "We have a few things you might like over here, some sectionals and such."

Milo walks up to Ollie's side as they peer around the store. The woman's eyes linger on their backs, before she glances at Dante, Ares, and me. While she's watching us, Ares wraps his palm around the back of my neck. It's not domineering, but it does speak to some part of me. My body softens, so my posture isn't nearly as rigid. Her eyes dart away, but she looks back again almost immediately.

Dante, seemingly oblivious to her attention, wraps his fingers around mine. "Do you see anything you like?"

The saleswoman's eyes go round, and she turns away from us. "I'll give you a few minutes. Let me know if you need anything." Her plastic smile is back, but I already noticed her response to us, and she doesn't even know the half of it. This is the kind of thing we'll be dealing with for the rest of our lives.

Ollie slings his arm over Milo's shoulder. "Okay, we'll walk around a bit."

"I think we freaked her out," I mutter once she's out of earshot.

"She's too nosy for her own good," Ares replies, unconcerned.

"Does it ever bother you?" I walk between the two brothers, not concerned enough about what anyone would think to move away from them, but I do cast a quick glance around to see if anyone is watching us.

"Honestly, I don't give a fuck what anyone thinks," Ares responds, scanning his eyes over all the furniture.

I feel Dante shrug against me. "The only thing that bothers me is most people will only judge you. They'll look right past all of us 'cause we're guys, but not with you." What they'll think about me goes unsaid, but we all know what he means, and sadly, it's the truth.

Ollie stops a few paces ahead of us and runs his palm over an overstuffed sectional. The fabric is a peacock green that almost looks like a short-napped velvet. I love it immediately. It's so different from anything else here.

"That's kind of bold, don't you think?" Milo looks around.

"That's why I like it. What do you guys think?" Ollie turns so he can see us. I step away from Ares and Dante so I can feel the fabric. It's just as soft as it looks. I don't hide my smile as I make my way around so I can sit down.

"The color would actually work with the darker floors." Dante folds his

arms over his chest.

I sink into a corner; the cushions are so deep it hits the backs of my calves. “Well, Laura looks like she likes it.” I can hear the smile in Milo’s voice as he comes over and sits next to me, with his arms widened on the back of the sofa. “It’s really comfortable,” he concedes.

“And it’s big enough for all of us, we could always add a couple chairs too, we have enough room.” Ollie goes up on his toes and looks around, already focused on the next task.

Ares settles himself on my other side and leans back a little. “You like this one?” he asks me.

“I do, it’s fun. I love the color.” I brush my hand over the velvety fabric again, watching as the color shifts a little under my palm.

“Let’s see if they have any chairs that we like.” Ollie shuffles off before any of us have a chance to follow. “Hey, Michelle.” He waves down the salesgirl. “Where can I find chairs?”

“That was surprisingly fast,” Dante mutters, watching Ollie’s back.

“What, the salesgirl?” I scoot forward so I can stand.

“No, how fast Ollie found something he liked.” Dante reaches for my hand and pulls me up.

Milo groans. “Don’t say that. Now it’s going to take him forever to find the rest.”

CHAPTER 25

Dante pulls the car into a spot not too far from the school. It feels strange being back here. I've only been away a couple weeks, but so much has changed. The engine shuts off, leaving us in the resounding silence.

I hear a weighty sigh, but I'm not sure whom it came from. I'm too focused on the brick box in front of me. "This is weirder than I thought it would be," Milo mumbles.

"It kinda is," I agree easily. None of us seem to be in a hurry to get out of the car. We get a few looks as the kids pass by us, a few even point at the vehicle. I knew the guys' absence would be noticed, but I didn't really think about how much.

"Are we doing this?" Ollie places his hand on the door handle. "Cause I'm totally fine sleeping in and doing the online shit," he offers, looking at me in the backseat.

My resolve crumbles for a brief second, and Ollie sees it on my face, because his mouth stretches into a grin.

"No, we can do this. It's only a few more months. And this is important to Laura." Dante sounds so much like Ares in that moment.

My shoulders slump a little as I wince. He's right. I know he's right. I'm just intimidated by returning to school. Plus, I don't know if I can go back to acting like I'm only friends with the guys. I think it's going to be obvious things have changed between us.

"It's only a few more months," Milo concurs with Dante, laying his hand on my thigh and gazing over at me.

"I know and he's right. I do want this. I fought hard to make sure I could

graduate. I'm not going to bail now." I try to sound convincing, but I think they can tell I'm just pumping myself up.

Dante's door creaks open. I keep my head down as I let Dante help me from the backseat. I pretend to be busy looking through the backpack Milo gave me to use several weeks ago. The car doors slam closed, and I'm quickly encircled by the guys. I peek up and see an easy grin falling over Ollie's features. I can see by the slight tic in his jaw that it's forced, but most people would never know.

"Hey." He lifts his hand in a wave but doesn't break from our group.

"Less than two weeks until we're off for Christmas," Milo reminds us.

Once we reach the doors, Ollie looks back at me. "I'll see you in third hour." His eyes roam over me. I lift my hand like I might reach for him, but let it fall back to my side. His face pinches before he mutters, "Hate this place." Ollie spins on his heel and stalks off without another word.

Milo watches Ollie's back, then turns to face me. "I'll see you at lunch, in the *lunchroom*." He stresses the last part. I roll my eyes but nod my agreement.

"See you at lunch." Milo's hand brushes against mine, then he's gone, slipping into the morning hallway traffic to get to class.

Dante places his forehead against mine. Anyone looking would think he's going to kiss me, but I know he's not. He pulls in a deep inhale, his eyes falling closed as he does. He doesn't say anything when he pulls back; instead, he walks away, looking over his shoulder to see me still standing in the same spot where he left me until he turns the corner.

I glance around once he's gone, wondering how many students were watching me, and how much of a lovesick fool I looked like staring after him. A few girls busy themselves in a locker when I catch them staring, but it didn't cause the stir I thought it would.

A vibration from my back pocket has me jerking into motion as I reach for the sleek, gold phone in my pocket. The little lock on the top pops open when it comes into view, and I run my thumb up from the bottom of my screen and see a text message from Ares.

Tapping on the bubble, it opens up to the thread with a picture of his face and the name "Dark Lord" underneath it.

I snicker and start walking to my class, looking down at my phone like so many other kids in the halls. I glance up frequently to make sure I don't bump into anyone, but I love having something to do that isn't watching the

floor.

Dark Lord: I miss you already.

His text makes my already gooey heart a little softer.

Me: miss you too, get to work! XOXO

Dark Lord: I am, but I can't stop thinking about you and the shower this morning. ;)

My face flushes, thinking about him surprising me this morning. Shower sex isn't comfortable, but it's damn fun. And the little wink is just too cute.

Me: I have to go to class. Love you and this morning. <3<3

I slide the phone into my back pocket, but the grin stays on my face as I walk into my homeroom until I see Delaney and her friends huddled together near my desk. Inwardly, I groan, but pretend to ignore them as I make my way over to my assigned seat.

"Look who's back. Finally get that case of herpes cleared up?" Delaney asks, with mock sympathy.

I almost ignore her, almost fall back into old habits, but then I remember I don't need to be that girl anymore. I look right into her eyes as I slide into the desk. "I'm really jealous of all the people who haven't had the pleasure of meeting you, Delaney."

Her head tilts to the side just a bit. "Oh, I see. You think you can get some new clothes, wash the trailer trash off, and be a new girl." Delaney leans in a little closer. "Funny story."

"New clothes or not, Delaney, I'm still the same girl who grew up in a trailer, just like you're the same cruel girl everyone pretends to like." I let my gaze travel up and down her form. "Did you need something else? Like me to get you a juice box and your blankey?"

Her face flushes red and the boy in the next row over fake coughs, "Burn."

"Stupid whore," she snaps, lashing out. That I do ignore.

"Take your seats so I can do attendance," the teacher calls out. Delaney jerks her way out of my aisle and stomps over to her seat, the two girls with her whispering furiously as they follow behind.

"Good for you for not taking her shit." The same boy from before congratulates me. I nod my head, somehow feeling lighter for standing up for myself.

We get dismissed quickly after roll call to head to first hour. Delaney and her friends are out the door almost before I'm even out of my desk. I'm not

foolish enough to think she'll leave me alone now. She'll lick her wounds and come back, probably worse than ever. I hope I didn't just make things worse for myself.

First and second hour are uneventful. Thankfully, we kept up with the online assignments so I'm able to pick right back up with the classes.

I'm already in my seat when Ollie struts into the classroom third hour. His eyes are on me the moment he comes through the door. His hand brushes my hair over my shoulder as he moves to the seat behind me. "So, a little birdy told me you and Delaney had a showdown this morning." His brows are raised in question.

I turn in my seat so I can face him and roll my eyes. "It wasn't a big deal." I try to downplay it, but I'm still riding a little high for not backing down from her, so a smile blooms on my lips, discounting my words.

Ollie gives me a censoring look, but he can't fight the grin on his face any more than I can. "I wish I would have been there to see it," he adds a bit wistfully.

I swat his arm. "You make it sound like it was a mud wrestling match, Oliver. It was like five seconds and a few words. Nothing that would probably even get us any trouble from school."

His eyes roll up and go unfocused. "Mud wrestling hadn't crossed my mind, but thanks for the visual."

"Knock it off," I say with a chuckle. More seriously, I question, "Who told you anyway?"

"Just a guy," Ollie answers with a shrug as the teacher calls everyone to attention. "Just so you know, I think it's epic." He leans forward and smacks a quick kiss on my cheek.

Feeling shy, I whisper, "Thank you," before turning around to face the front of the room.



TUGGING my backpack up on my shoulders, I head toward the lunchroom. I drag my phone out of my pocket and open up the text app. The text with Ares is still open, so I tap out a quick reply just for something to do...

Me: how's your day going?

I'm looking down at the little gray bubble that tells me he's replying

when my arm gets shoved. The phone goes flying from my hand. I can't stop the small yelp from leaving my lips as I watch it hit the ground, then slide a few feet.

Looking in the direction I was shoved from, I see Delaney standing next to me, her arms crossed over her chest with a satisfied smile on her smug face. "You should really watch where you're going."

Instead of replying, I rush over to pick up the phone. A heavy pair of black boots stop right in front of me as I stoop to pick up my phone. My fingers are shaking. I've never had anything as expensive as this phone. Delaney and her need to be a dick probably just broke it.

I know those boots, know the weight of Dante's eyes on me. I stand up and meet his gaze. "I was walking and texting," I confess. "But she did that on purpose." I turn my head and glare at Delaney. She's completely unrepentant. "Hey, Delaney," I call out, loud enough that half the hallway stops and looks.

I go up on my tippy toes and fist the neck of Dante's shirt. I drag him down to me and plant a kiss right on his lips in front of everyone—but most importantly, Delaney. It's probably childish, but damn, does it feel good, especially when I feel a growl rumble from Dante's chest as he steps closer and deepens the kiss.

Much too soon, I feel him get ripped away from me, a feral sounding snarl curling his lips. When I open my eyes, I see a teacher I've noticed around the halls pulling his hand away from Dante's shoulder slowly.

"No PDA in the halls." He tries to sound firm, but the way he licks his bottom lip and the way his eyes are darting over Dante, tells me he's not very confident.

I grab Dante's fingers and tug on him. He looks down at me, the amber in his eyes almost glowing. Addressing the teacher, I say, "Sorry, won't happen again." Dante's shoulders slouch a little as he shoves his free hand into his front pocket.

"See that it doesn't." The teacher walks away, snapping his head left and right to glower at the students still standing around. "Get to lunch, or your next class," he orders, still retreating from Dante and me.

"Classy," I hear Delaney spit.

"Jealous?" is all I say to her, before pulling Dante down the hall.

"I think that bitch broke my phone." I glance down at the phone still in my hand as I stomp into the lunchroom.

Swiping my thumb up from the bottom of the screen, it brightens. Spiderwebs mar the surface. “Dammit,” I curse.

“Look, it’s fine. That’s just the screen protector, see?” Dante lifts my palm, cradling the phone and twists it to the light.

“Oh.” I turn it over several times, already feeling relieved by his words. “Are you sure? It looks pretty bad.”

“It’s fine; it’s in a case. We can replace the screen protector later. I drop my phone all the time, and it’s surprisingly sturdy if you have a case. Let’s go eat, I’m hungry.” His voice is a little gruff.

I peer up at him to gauge his mood. “Are you mad about the kiss?” I decide to ask, since I can’t tell what he’s thinking.

He jerks his head and squints at me. “Why the hell would you think that?” He stops in his tracks and focuses on me.

“You sound kinda pissed,” I answer with a shrug of my shoulders.

“I am pissed off... at Delaney. I don’t want you to have to deal with her shit. Plus, I wanted to rip that teacher’s face off for pulling me away from you,” he growls.

That makes me feel a little better. A grin tugs at my lips. “How pissed was she? I didn’t even get a chance to look.”

“I didn’t notice either.” He shakes his head and continues over to the table where Ollie and Milo are already waiting. “But I bet she was madder than hell.”

“Whom are we talking about?” Ollie scoots over, giving me room to climb into the seat next to him.

“Delaney,” Dante replies, while taking the seat across from me.

“What now?” Ollie rolls his eyes.

“She shoved my arm and knocked my phone out of my hands.”

“She did, when?” Milo leans his elbows on the table, peering over at me.

“Just now, on the way to lunch.” I hold up the phone, showing them the evidence of the cracked screen protector so they can see.

“Holy shit.” Milo grabs the phone from my hand.

“And what did you do, little Muenster?” Ollie inquires, a smile already blooming on his full lips.

I look down, suddenly finding the tabletop very interesting. “I kissed Dante in front of her.”

I look up when I hear a loud snort. “That would have her seeing red,” Ollie agrees and ruffles my hair.

“Here.” Milo hands my phone back. “The phone looks okay. She needs to keep her hands to herself.” He glowers around the lunchroom, probably looking for her.

“She’s not used to people standing up to her,” I tell them, and slide the phone into my back pocket.

“I’ll say something to her.” Dante peels back the foil on one of the subs I made us last night.

“Don’t bother, that would just encourage her. Ignore her and let me deal with it.” I unwrap my own sandwich.

“As long as she doesn’t go too far,” Milo interjects, eyeing Dante.

I wave his concern off. People like Delaney are only powerful when you give the power to them. I’m not afraid of what she can do to me anymore. “I’ll be more careful,” I promise, and I will. If I hadn’t been distracted by the phone, she wouldn’t have had the opportunity to push me.

CHAPTER 26

Dante and I walk out of art hand in hand. There's no point in hiding our relationship after this afternoon. During classes after lunch, I had to listen to all the whispers about our kiss.

The phone in my pocket vibrates. Dante looks down when I pull it out. "Ares?" he asks.

"I'm sure. You guys are the only ones with the number."

"He probably gave it to our parents." Dante pushes the steel bar on the door so we can exit the school.

"It's Ares," I confirm, checking to see what he wrote.

Dark Lord: Had to run out, thought I'd be home before you, but I'm running late. Be home soon.

Me: :(miss you.

"He's said he'll be home soon." I'm bummed he won't be at home when we get there. I've gotten used to having all of the guys around, and I just spent most of the day without them. I was looking forward to cuddling on the new furniture that was supposed to be delivered today.

"What are we doing for dinner? Should we stop and pick something up?" Leave it to Dante to already be worried about our next meal.

"We still have plenty of stuff at the house. We can make something." I tighten my heavy sweater around me and hunch my shoulders. It's finally starting to get colder here. I might even need a real coat, or at least a jacket.

"Cold?" Dante wraps his arm around my back, warming me up.

"Let's get out of here," Ollie calls out, waving us over from the car. I can see the top of Milo's head already in the backseat. I quicken my steps, the heat of the car calling to me.

Ollie climbs into the backseat as we approach. I close my door quickly after sliding into the front seat, rubbing my palms together. “I feel like it’s colder now than it was this morning.” I shiver again as Dante starts the car, and chilled air blasts from the vents. He flips the dial to turn up the heat.

“The sun will be setting in like an hour, it’s almost winter,” Milo tells me from the backseat. “Any more drama with Delaney?”

“Nah, I don’t have her in any of my afternoon classes. It’s not that big of a deal.” I watch out the window as we file into the exit line.

“People were still talking about it. That, and the apparently epic kiss we missed,” Ollie adds.

I tilt my head back. “I know. I heard people blowing that way out of proportion all afternoon. It was just a little kiss.”

Dante turns his head to look at me, his eyes slightly narrowed, and a smirk on his lips. “A little kiss, huh?”

“It was,” I defend as my cheeks go a little pink.

“That’s not what I heard,” Ollie singsongs.

“I heard you punched Mr. Balm,” Milo says and chuckles.

“He didn’t; he would have gotten in trouble for something like that. See? Way out of proportion,” I reiterate.

“I wanted to hit him, but it wasn’t even close. That part *is* exaggerated.” Dante looks left and right before punching the gas to speed out of the lot.

“Did the furniture come?” Ollie asks, changing the topic.

“I’m not sure. Ares texted, said he had to run out, and that he would be home later.” I didn’t even think to ask him if it came.

“We should go to the diner since he’s not home. We haven’t seen Gran or Gus in a few weeks,” Milo suggests.

Dante looks over at me, his eyes rounded like a puppy, all hopeful. He knows if we go to the diner, Maggie will feed him.

“That’s fine with me, I hope she hasn’t been too swamped.” A little bit of guilt hits me. Even though I know it would be safe to go back to work now, I really don’t want to. I’ve been working almost full time for years. I pick at my thumb, wondering what I’ll say if she or the guys ask me if I want to start working for her again.

“You sure you don’t mind going?” Dante inquires, when we’re almost to the diner. “You’re being awfully quiet.”

I shake away his concern and the lazy thoughts. If she needs me, I’ll work. “No, I want to see Maggie. I was just lost in thought.”

“Good, ‘cause I can already taste Gus’s famous Cali burger,” Ollie murmurs, sighing wistfully.

“I hope he has some lasagna. I’ve been wanting it ever since you got it when we first hung out.” Milo places his hand on the top of the front seat, preparing to push it forward and climb out.

“You picked the burger?” I get out and wait for Ollie to climb out behind me.

“Yeah, I thought I wanted the burger, until I watched you eat the lasagna.”

Dante jogs ahead and opens the front door for all of us. The chimes ring when Ollie pushes through the next door. Maggie looks up from the counter, a wide smile forming on her face when she sees us.

“Well, lookie here.” She sets her hands on her rounded hips.

“Hey, Gran.” Milo steps up and wraps her in a hug. Her eyes fall closed as she embraces him back.

We each take a turn hugging her before we find a booth. I’m relieved when I look around and see that it’s not too busy. Maggie follows us over and leans against the side of the booth. “You guys eating, or just stopping in?”

“Eating,” the guys chorus.

Maggie chuckles. “What’ll ya have?”

The guys look to me, waiting for me to go first. “Any soup today?”

“Vegetable beef and broccoli cheddar,” Maggie tells me.

“I’ll have the broccoli, but may I have some bread, too please?” I fold my arms on the table, thinking the hot soup will be perfect. I need to see if Gus is willing to share any of his recipes. As soon as we get the kitchen done, I plan on putting it to good use.

“You got it. Boys?” Maggie looks around the table.

“Lasagna,” Milo pipes up first.

“Cali burger and cheese sticks for me,” Ollie adds, leaving just Dante to order.

“I’ll have a bowl of veggie soup, a bacon burger, extra bacon, and fries, please.”

“Hungry?” Maggie teases. We all know Dante is always hungry. “I’ll go tell Gus, shouldn’t be too long. Help yourselves to some drinks.” She waves over her shoulder on her way to the kitchen.

“I’ll get them. What do you want, Muenster?” Ollie puts both palms on the table, getting ready to stand.

“I’ll help,” I offer, standing too.

“Guys, usual?” Ollie checks with Milo and Dante, while I head over to the soda machine. “Three cokes, and a fruit punch for you, right?” Ollie says when he meets me behind the counter.

“Yup, probably didn’t even need to ask.” I snicker, filling the sodas.

When we return to our seats, I’m struck by how different things were for us just a few short months ago. I thought they were only hanging out with me because they felt sorry for me. Was I really that clueless, or were they really good at hiding how they felt? I scoff, they were kinda assholes half the time back then, no wonder I was so confused.

Milo tilts his head at me when I make the sound. “What?”

“I was just thinking about how much things have changed over the last few months.”

“That they have.” Dante places his palm above my knee on my thigh.

I lean my head on his shoulder. “I can’t believe I fell asleep on you guys that first day.” I cover my face with my hands. Even though the embarrassment is old, it’s still there.

“Awe, you were exhausted, Muenster. I wish you would have told us what was going on sooner.” Ollie reaches across the table and pulls my hand down from my face.

“I don’t think any of us were great at communication back then.” I look up when the chime rings from habit. Ares slinks through the door, a tiny grin tipping one side of his lips.

“How did you know we’d be here?” Dante asks, as Ares pulls a chair from a nearby table and sets it at the end of our booth. He leans over and plants a soft slow kiss on my lips. “Hi,” he whispers, just for me.

“Hi,” I whisper back.

“I tracked your phones,” Ares answers Dante’s question.

“We ordered, do you want me to run and give Gus an order for you?” I offer, ready to stand.

“No, no. I got it. Dinner or just a snack?” He looks around the table.

“Everyone got a meal,” I answer for us.

“Okay, be right back.” He leans down and kisses me again before going. When I look up, I notice Delaney. She’s sitting a few booths down from us with an older girl who looks strikingly similar next to her, with her fingers curled over the top of Delaney’s arm.

“Shit,” I curse looking down. There’s a man in the booth with them, I can

see the back of his short hair, but he's all the way over in the corner. I can't believe I didn't notice her sooner.

"What's wrong?" Dante looks around.

Through my teeth, I grate, "Delaney is here."

"So?" Dante snorts.

"So, she just watched Ares kiss me... after I kissed you at school." I want to bang my head on the table. I can already imagine the shit she's going to spread around school. Not that it probably won't be true, but they won't understand it.

"It's none of her fucking business," Ollie spouts, looking over his shoulder to glare in her direction.

The young woman next to Delaney has her eyes locked on Ares's back as he heads into the kitchen. She taps Delaney's shoulder and starts scooting out of the bench before she has a chance to get up.

Stumbling, Delaney rises, her lips pinched. I watch the young woman lift her hand and call out, "Hey, Ares." She almost sounds shocked to have found him here. Ares looks over his shoulder, his eyes shrewd.

"Oh my goodness! You *are* back in Canton." The woman approaches Ares, her arms open like she's going to move in for a hug. This must be the sister she told me about, the one who warned her to stay away from the Costas.

When she's within touching distance, Ares slides both of his hands into his front pockets. "Brenda, right?" Ares tips his head to the side.

"Brienne," she corrects him, her voice low. Taking the hint, she slows her approach and fluffs the side of her hair, letting her arms fall to her sides as if they weren't lifted to embrace him. "I ran into Mia the other day, she said you were back." Her smile is wide as she stares up at Ares. "Delaney even mentioned seeing you a few weeks ago." She motions over her shoulder at the table where her sister is.

I trade a glance with Delaney, but she looks down at the table, her face pinched. The man across from her doesn't even look over in his other daughter's direction.

"Are you staying in town?" Brienne takes another step closer to Ares, like she can't help herself.

"Not in Canton, but nearby, yes," Ares confirms. "I was just about..." His voice trails off as Maggie comes out of the kitchen door. "To put an order in," he finishes, sounding defeated.

“I figured you’d show up.” Maggie gives Ares a good glare, even going as far as to put her hands on her hips and look down her nose at him.

He has the good sense to look contrite. “Hey, Maggie.” His voice is sweet and young sounding.

“Don’t you try that with me. I’m still cross with you,” she scolds. Brianne is still standing way too close and absorbing every spoken word.

Ares lets his shoulders droop a little. “Would it help if I apologized?” Maggie lifts her brows like she’s waiting.

Ares looks over at Brianne. “Excuse me,” he tells her, and steps closer to Maggie. I know he would rather Brianne not witness it, but he lifts his chin up and gives all his attention to the grandmotherly figure in front of him. “Sorry I was a miserable asshole, Mags. I was stupid with worry about Laura, which isn’t an excuse.” He nods his head once when he’s finished.

A wide smile unfolds on Maggie’s face. “Now that all that’s sorted, I don’t expect it will be happening again,” she warns him.

“It won’t,” he promises.

Her smile turns a little sideways. “Now, you have to talk to Gus. He might not be as easy to convince,” she cautions.

Ares pushes into the kitchen, ignoring the fact that Brianne is still standing there waiting for him.

“Oh, I’ll just catch him when he comes out,” she says quickly, mostly to herself, and rushes back to the table. Delaney scoots in and takes the inside corner. Their heads drop close together as Brianne’s lips move furiously in a whisper.

Ollie and Milo both turn back around to face Dante and me. Ollie rolls his eyes. “She reeks of desperation. Not a good look on anyone,” he sneers.

It’s a good five minutes before Ares comes out of the kitchen with his hand on the back of his neck. The bell, indicating an order is up, rings immediately after. Maggie gives Ares’s arm a pat as she heads to the window to pick up our order. Milo slides out of the booth to help her.

When I go to stand, Ares lays his hand on my shoulder and takes his seat at the end of our table. “They got it.” His hand smooths down my arm and he dips his face close to mine, I lean forward on instinct and let him give me another soft kiss. When I pull back, I lick my lips. He tastes like the icing on top of a cinnamon roll, delicious.

“Here I thought you were in there apologizing, but you were eating dessert.”

“I did a little of both. Couldn’t let Maggie think Gus let me off too easily.” Ares winks at me.

The woman in question hefts a tray over to the table and starts distributing everyone’s orders except Ares, his comes a few minutes later.

“Heads up. She’s coming over,” Dante grumbles in a low tone. I glance up to see Brienne walking over to our table with Delaney walking behind her, looking almost reluctant.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to catch you before I take off.” She waits like she’s expecting Ares to reply. When he doesn’t, she shoves her hand out in front on me like she wants to shake my hand. “Hi, I’m Brienne. Ares and I go way back.” She glances at him and licks her bottom lip. The suggestion couldn’t be clearer.

I leave her hand hanging. “Laura,” I tell her meeting her eyes.

“So, Delaney told me you were dating Dante?” Her head tilts to the side like she’s genuinely confused. She peeks at Ares from the corner of her eye.

I ball up my napkin. “Yup,” I confirm. “And Ares.” I tilt my head in his direction. “And Milo.” Milo actually raises his hand like she might not know who he is. Then I finish off with, “And Ollie.” If Delaney is going to talk shit, might as well give her something to chew on.

Delaney snaps her head up at my proclamation.

“This isn’t a joke.” Brienne narrows her eyes on me. “She saw you kissing Dante today.”

“Never said it was.” My tone is bored.

Brienne looks around the table, her announcement isn’t going like she expected. “That’s it? They just pass you around?” She laughs darkly, making it sound filthy.

“Don’t. Just don’t.” Ares doesn’t say anything else, doesn’t need to.

Brienne’s mouth pops open, her eyes are wide like she’s in shock. “Ah, you guys are freaks.”

Ollie snorts. “You’re just jealous. Move along, kiddos.” He dismisses them with a wave of his hand.

Brienne turns on her heel and storms away, but Delaney is still standing there until her sister grabs her arm and drags her away.

Once they’re gone, I whisper, “Sorry, guys. Might not have been the best way to handle that, but I’m really tired of Delaney’s shit.”

“I’m not complaining. Who gives a fuck what she or anyone else thinks?” Milo reaches over to Ollie’s plate and snatches a pickle.

I look around at them, amazed that we've come this far. Not that long ago I probably would have sat there and let Delaney and her sister be bitches: just kept my head down and been too worried about everyone else's reaction to say anything back. Hell, I didn't even have the confidence to even think about being with all the guys, let alone say it out loud. A warmth blooms inside me. I'm finally feeling like this life is mine to take, to enjoy.

Dante places his hand on my leg and continues eating like we weren't interrupted. When I look over, Ares is watching me, his eyes dark, as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking. I still think he can read my mind sometimes. I stick my tongue out at him—childish, I know, but fun anyway.

He smiles the smile that is only mine, the one that goes all the way up into his onyx eyes. He looks a little devious, but he's the furthest thing from it. It's filled with love and acceptance.

CHAPTER 27

I palm the key to Ares's Rover. I'm heading over to Rosa's to see my mom and Wyatt today, alone. I'm not really worried about my license. I'll be eighteen soon, so there's no point in getting a permit. Ollie offered to come with me, but I need to do this on my own.

I shove the fob into the pocket of my jeans and climb into the plush interior. It smells like a combination of Ares and leather. Gripping the steering wheel with both hands, I let out a long breath. I'm not worried about driving, not even in this fancy-ass truck. No, I'm nervous about seeing my parents again. My parents... that feels weird to even think.

They know I'm coming, and so does Rosa, so there's no backing out. Gearing myself up, I hit the button to start the car. There's no turning back now. I can do this.

The drive over feels way too short. I'm pulling into the driveway before I know it, and the cheery yellow house looms before me. I park in front of the garage, not getting out immediately. I've accepted that the guys aren't going to abandon me, but I'm not as confident with my mom.

A knock on the window startles me. With my hand over my heart, I roll down the window and find a grinning Mal. "Hey, Laura, didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay." I shake my head in denial. "I was zoned out."

"I just wanted to let you know we're running out for a bit." He studies me. "That okay?" He's asking if I'm okay being alone with my mom and Wyatt.

"Yeah, totally fine. Do I need to move?" I inquire, concerned about where I'm parked.

“No, we’re good. See you in a little bit,” Mal tells me, before knocking on the roof of the car.

“See ya.” My voice is small as he turns away and jogs back into the side door of the house. When I climb out of the car, I tap my back pocket, feeling for my phone. I’ve only had it a short time, but I’ve already come to rely on it.

As I reach the side door, William is opening it. “Hey, pretty girl, how are you?” He ruffles the top of my hair.

“I’m good, how are you?”

“Good, good.” He looks over his shoulder than places his hand near his mouth, and whispers, “We won’t be gone long.”

“Thanks,” I whisper back, and a little bit of relief enters my tone.

Rosa enters the mudroom, her shoes already on and her purse over her arm. “*Ciao*, Laura, you look pretty.” She leans forward and gives me a short hug.

“Thank you.” I find myself saying again, brushing my hands over my stomach.

“Your mom is in the kitchen,” she says, and walks out the door William is still holding open.

“Okay, have fun.” I wave a little awkwardly as they leave. Mal enters the mudroom soon after, following them outside.

I kick off my shoes and toe them over near the wall. I really should quit stalling. I’m sure Rosa or Mal already mentioned I’d arrived. It’s a little strange being here without one of the guys.

I find my way to the kitchen. Other than Ares’s room, it’s where we always spent the most time here. “Wow.” I’m struck almost speechless at the changes. It looks like one of the holiday magazines you see in the checkout lane at the grocery store.

I don’t even notice my mom curled up on the sofa next to a fat Christmas tree until she speaks. “Pretty amazing, huh?” She looks around at the little touches of Christmas dotted all over the room.

“How long have they been working on this?” I sit on the edge on the sofa opposite her.

“I don’t think it took them very long. One day, it was just all here.” Mom’s lips turn down. “But I’ve been a pretty preoccupied. You came alone?” She looks over to the door I came through.

“Yeah, just me today. Where’s Wyatt?”

“He should be right out.” Mom places her book on the couch next to her.

“You read?” It’s the second time I’ve seen her with a book.

She looks over at it. “I used to. I have been again recently.”

“So, that’s where I get it. I never knew. You didn’t read much, that I noticed.” I don’t mean to already bring the conversation back to how she used to be, but I can’t help it.

“No, I guess I didn’t,” she agrees. “How’s school going?” She balls up her hands in her lap.

“Okay, I guess. I’ve only been back for a few days.” This small talk is hard. It’s not something we ever really did before.

The sound of shuffling footsteps has me turning to find Wyatt walking slowly in from the direction of Ares’s old bedroom.

“Hi there,” he greets me, his voice bright. I take a second to note the changes in his appearance. His hair looks a little fuller and not nearly as dull. And that’s just the beginning. His frame has filled out. He’s still thin, but his entire bearing has changed. He looks taller, and he moves with more confidence—it’s almost alarming.

I look over at my mom and watch the shift in her as well. The change in her is more subtle, but it’s still there. She moves her body so it’s angled toward him, her hands fall open, and even the rigidity in her shoulders falls away.

Wyatt comes over to my sofa and takes a seat on the opposite end. “I’m glad you stopped by.”

“Sure...” I flounder, looking for something to say.

“Rosa told us you guys bought a house?” he continues.

“Ares did... well, I guess we did.” I tilt my head, thinking about it. It’s still strange to think of their money as our money.

“She mentioned you guys are doing some work on it,” Wyatt encourages, keeping the conversation going.

“Yeah.” I breathe out a huff of air, at least this gives me something to talk about. “Ollie was thinking about just staying there until we built something further back on the property, but I like it. I think the guys are coming to like it too.”

“What kind of work are you guys doing? I used to work with my dad, he ran a construction crew.” He gets a little more comfortable, leaning back into the sofa.

“Right now, they’re fixing up the basement or lower level part, but I think

they're almost done with that."

"I was going to make some coffee, want some?" My mom asks, standing. I look at Wyatt, waiting for his response. "Laura?"

"Oh, yeah...sure, I guess," I stammer, surprised she was talking to me. She moves to the kitchen without Wyatt answering.

Wyatt and I talk for a few minutes about the renovations before my mom comes back with two large, white mugs in her hands. She holds one out to me.

"It sounds like it will be really nice when it's finished." She smiles down at me, waiting for me to take the mug.

A little surprised she was listening, I nod. "It is nice, and it will be really nice once it's done," I agree.

"I'd love to see it some time." She cradles her own mug and folds herself back into the corner she was sitting in before.

"That would be... yeah, that would be great." I blow over the coffee and take a sip. I'm not used to having her attention on me, but a feeling of happiness bubbles up inside me at the thought of her coming to see me at our house, something almost like pride. "Do you... I mean, do you go out often?" I wince a little, but I don't want to set myself up, thinking she's going to come and be disappointed when she doesn't.

"For you I will." She keeps her eyes locked on mine. "I know I messed things up, Laura. I'm hoping you'll give me the chance to try to repair that. I know it's not going to make up for everything that happened, or happen overnight, but I love you." She shifts the mug to one hand and wipes under her eye. "And I would like the chance to show you that."

I slide my hand down my thigh. "Okay, yeah. I would like that." I don't know what else to say. I'm worried she's going to disappoint me, but I have to give her a chance. I want to anyway.

Wyatt lays his hand on my arm. "Thank you." He chuckles. "I feel like I'm always thanking you. You've given me so much to be grateful for."

I feel a blush cover my cheeks. I don't think I've done much he should be thanking me for. Except killing Leon, and can someone really be thankful for that? "You're welcome. I guess." I look down at my lap.

"Maybe we could come over for Christmas?" Wyatt suggests, sounding hopeful. "Or is that too soon?" He looks back and forth between my mom and me.

"I'm okay with that. We're coming here Christmas Eve, but if you

wanted to stop by on Christmas, I know the guys would be okay with it.” I leave the decision up to my mom.

Her eyes squint a little, but she gives me a small smile. “That sounds good.”

Wyatt claps his hands together. “Now, what do you want for Christmas?” He sounds so excited.

“Ahh, I have no idea. I haven’t even thought about it since we didn’t do presents.” I glance at Mom.

She looks away, biting the corner of her lip. “We will this year,” she murmurs.

“Whatever, I guess.” I don’t think I’ve ever said ‘I guess’ so much in my entire life.

“We’ll figure out something, right, Mandy?” Wyatt pulls her back into the conversation. She nods quickly and takes a sip of her cooling coffee.



I PULL my phone out of my back pocket when I close the side door. I’m more tired than I have the right to be, considering I was only there for an hour, and all we did was talk. But nevertheless, I’m exhausted.

“Hey, it’s me,” I tell Ares.

“How did it go?” His voice comes through the phone clearly.

“Okay, good, I think. They want to stop by on Christmas Day.” I know I already agreed, but now I feel like I should have talked to them first.

“Do you want them to?”

“I kinda do.” I pull on my seatbelt and hit the start button. “Do you mind?”

“No, you never need to ask, *Cara*. Are you on your way home?”

“Yeah, just now leaving.”

“No talking and driving,” he admonishes me.

“I haven’t even left the driveway, Ares.”

“Okay, see you when you get home. Drive safe.”

“I will, bye.”

“Love you, bye.”

“Love you too,” I reply, but I think he already hung up.

I hit the red icon and set the phone in the cup holder, before backing out

and turning to head up the driveway.

I feel much lighter on the drive home. All the time I spent worrying was kinda wasted. It wasn't even that bad, awkward at times, yes, but much better than the last time I went to see them.

When I pull in, I see Dante's car is missing. I wonder where he went. Ares didn't mention anything.

I punch in the code for the new entry door on the lower level. The pad makes a beeping sound, and I hear the lock disengage.

"Hey," I call up the stairs. "Anybody home?"

"In here," I hear Ares answer from somewhere deeper in the house.

"Where?"

"Bedroom."

"Where is everybody?" I mutter, and start up the stairs.

"No, down here." I look over my shoulder to see Ares leaning out of the master bedroom down the hall.

"Are you working?" I hop back down and meet him in the hall.

"Not really. Come see." He motions for me to follow him into the bedroom.

"Whoa, you guys were busy, I wasn't even gone that long." I look around the room. It looks similar to Ares's old bedroom, but different. "Did they finish the bathroom?" I walk past the huge, low bed and peer into a bathing oasis. "Oh my God, that is a tub."

I look over my shoulder at Ares. His arms are folded across his chest and he's leaning on the doorframe.

"How the heck did you guys hide this?" I walk farther into the room and run my hand over the smooth surface of the huge, white tub.

"We didn't even try to hide it, there's just been a lot going on," he answers as he follows me. It's not that big of a room, and the tub takes up most of the space, but there's still a separate shower stall and a toilet hidden behind a half wall.

Every inch is covered in gleaming white tile with small, black squares dotted around the room in no apparent pattern. I turn around and throw my arms over Ares's shoulders. "This is amazing, thank you." I get a little teary-eyed, knowing I will never have to use another camp shower if I don't want to, I have my very own bathroom.

"What's wrong? Do you not like it?" He pushes me back a little so he can look down at me. "We can change it," he offers.

“No, I love it.” My voice wobbles a little. “It’s just... I’ve never had a real bathroom. It’s stupid, I know.” I bury my face in his chest before I start really crying.

“It’s not stupid, sweetheart.” He palms the back of my head, holding me closer to him.

“It’s stupid that I’m crying about it.” I’m a little outraged at myself.

“No, it’s not,” Ares soothes, comforting me.

I give myself a few moments to get past the emotions. “Where is everyone else?”

“We weren’t sure how long you would be gone, so they decided to hit the store. I won the draw for staying here in case you came home.” Ares places a soft kiss on the side of my temple.

“So, we have the whole place to ourselves?” I bite my lip and gaze up at him. “For how long?”

Ares wraps his hand around the front of my throat and forces my head back a little. “Long enough,” he whispers.

CHAPTER 28

A sigh falls from my parted lips. Ares has a way of making me feel as if I can let everything go. No matter how heavy the burden, he would more than happily carry it for me.

My body slackens as he steps in even closer, his lips ghosting over my cheek as he leans near my ear. “I want you to take a bath.”

My brow furrows, this is not where I thought this was going. “A bath?” I sound a tiny bit whiny.

“Yes, now strip.” His voice has a hard edge to it. One that sends a delicious tingle down my spine and a jolt of anticipation through my core. He releases his hold on my throat and walks over to the tub. I turn to watch him as he unbuttons his cuffs and rolls up the sleeves of his white dress shirt. Damn, I have no idea why that is so sexy, but it so is. He bends and starts the taps to fill the tub, oblivious to my gawking.

Ares inspects me when he’s done with the task. “Something wrong, *Cara*?” I swallow thickly and shake my head. “Why aren’t you naked?”

My hand immediately goes to the hem of my shirt. I don’t tell him that he’s too distracting for his own good. I just do as he asked and strip.

Ares sits on the side of the tub, before bringing his foot up and removing each shoe and sock, lining them up neatly near the wall. Once he’s done, he leans back and watches me.

I can’t take my eyes off him as the darkness in his eyes bleeds to cover all the white. His gaze is roaming over me like I’m the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen.

I push my jeans down my legs, lifting my knees to pull them all the way off. I don’t bother trying to be seductive. I’m way too eager to get into the

quickly filling tub and see what exactly Ares has planned.

He beckons me over with a crook of his finger once I'm nude. I walk over until I'm standing between his spread knees, our eyes still locked on one another. Ares leans his head back and lets his eyes fall closed when I thread my fingers into the hair above his ears.

I take advantage of my height and plant a soft kiss on each eyelid, then his lips. Ares responds by wrapping his arm around my back and arching me closer to him.

Too soon he stands, keeping me locked against him. I brace my hands on his shoulders, my toes are dangling near his knees, but he doesn't break the kiss.

I angle my head to deepen the kiss. It feels like Ares touches my soul when we're like this. Like he can actually invade my insides and lay claim to the part of himself that lives within me, and stoke it to grow even larger.

The steady rhythm of my heart thuds against my chest, crashing into his. Can he feel it the same way I can? Does he know he's part of the reason it beats so strongly? "I love you," I mumble around the kiss, unable not to.

"I love you more," he replies, his eyes opening to show me the white constellations that frightened me the first time I witnessed it.

"Impossible," I counter, and run my finger over his cheek.

"We can argue about that later. Right now, I want you to get in the tub." He quirks an eyebrow at me, telling me the debate isn't finished.

Ares sets my feet on the edge of the bathtub, holding me by the waist. "Tell me if it's too hot," he warns.

I stick a toe in and the burn is just right. Another sigh leaves my lips as I submerge into the water all the way up to my neck. The excess water flows over a thin slit all around the tub, making it so the water is able to go to the tippy top.

"Okay?" he asks, turning off the tap for the water.

"Perfect," I purr, closing my eyes. "Are you getting in?" I can already feel the sweat beading on my upper lip.

"Not this time." His voice holds that dark edge again. I look up to see him scanning his eyes over me, the clear bathwater not hiding an inch of my flesh from his passionate eyes.

"You're just going to watch me take a bath?" I smile, thinking it's a little silly, but I also have to admit, it's rather exciting. Turns out I may be a little bit of an exhibitionist, first with Ollie watching me and Dante, and now this.

“For now. Do you mind?” Ares questions.

The ‘for now’ part sounds promising. “No, not at all.” I lift my hair off my back and pull it over my shoulder, then rest my head against the tub, relaxing.

Ares leaves the room for a moment, and when he returns, he has the body wash from the upstairs bathroom and a black washcloth. I sit up a little, preparing to take the stuff from his hands, but he kneels next to the tub.

“What are you doing?” I chuckle a little.

“Shush.” Ares narrows his eyes. I widen mine in response, and pretend to lock my lips and throw away the key.

He dips the cloth into the water and wrings it out before squirting a small amount of the body wash on. I sit up a little more, my arm covering my breasts a little. Is he really going to wash me?

“Lie back.” My suspicion confirmed, I lay back into the water, feeling a little wary. This is kinda weird, right?

Ares lifts my arm, holding my fingers, and brushes the cloth up my arm slowly. Okay, so it might be a little weird, but it feels pretty damn good. His hand shifts to cradle my forearm as he moves high up my arm, reaching my collarbones and shoulders. He pays special attention to my throat, making sure to be extra gentle.

I watch his eyes travel over the area, an open hunger on his face as he bites his full bottom lip. Eventually, he moves away from my throat and motions for me to hand him my other arm. All of this is done in silence. Only the noise of the water and our breathing fills the room, which still sounds a little hollow in the absence of any personal items, there aren’t even any towels in here yet.

Ares continues with his job meticulously. Washing my legs and feet after my arms, he then works his way up the center of my body, starting at my collarbones again. I tilt my head back and he drags the fabric over my chest. My nipples are already aching for his caress, so I hiss when he finally touches me.

After a few moments, he abandons the cloth to sink to the bottom of the tub and uses his hands instead. The soap is long gone, but my skin still feels slick under his fingers.

I undulate, wanting him to touch more of me. Ares has the patience of a saint. I can barely keep myself from grabbing the tight shirt he’s wearing and dragging him into the tub with me, but he seems completely calm as his hand

travels farther south.

His fingertips dance over my pubic bone. I lift my hips, but instead of his hand delving lower, he pulls back, denying me. I want to pout, but I don't. I know Ares will give me what I need, want. I just need to wait for it, be patient like he is, he will definitely make my obedience worth it.

I relax my body again, and my arms float out to my sides, just skimming the surface of the water. Ares makes a small sound of approval and rewards me by sliding his hand between my legs. His middle finger brushes over my labia, back and forth a few times, and I almost spread my legs, but remain still.

He puts his whole hand between my thighs and cups me, his palm tight against my mound. I can feel an echo of his touch, but it's not enough. I look up at the ceiling, my hair slinking over my shoulder to fall completely in the water. It allows my entire body to float up, and I feel Ares's lips lock around my nipple the moment it breaks the surface.

Not caring how wet I am, or how wet he's going to get, Ares puts one arm under me and locks the other over my waist, pulling me up from the water. He stands, bearing my full weight, and soaking his clothes in the process. I wrap my arms around his back and cling to his shoulders as he carries me bridal style to the newly finished bedroom.

Ares places me on the bed and steps back. I rise up on my elbows and watch as he strips out of the damp white shirt. It gets dropped to the floor along with his undershirt, and then he unbuttons his pants next, shucking them off quickly along with his boxer briefs.

Ares naked is a sight to behold. His skin is naturally tan, and the short, dark hairs on his chest tapering down to the thin trail below his belly button is so fucking sexy, I can barely refrain from reaching out to him.

He crawls onto the bed, his eyes peering up at me from under his brow like some sort of predator stalking me. I lean back and allow him to drag himself over me. The coolness that accompanies his powers comes with him, tempering the heat from the hot water.

Ares's hips go between my legs. It's the first time I've felt him without anything between us. I know he'll get a condom, but God, does he feel amazing against me.

I wrap my knees around his hips. Ares leans over on one elbow, and plants his palm on my throat with the other. I tip my head back, loving the feel of him holding me down with his body pushed up against mine.

He turns my head and runs his tongue up the side of my neck, biting the bottom of my earlobe. I shiver under him. Ares rocks his hips up and I feel him so close to where I need him to be. I wiggle, not thinking about the consequences of what could happen if he were to slide inside me, only how good it would feel and how desperately I want it.

Ares pulls back, and he kisses his way down my body, paying special attention to my breasts before sliding down far enough that he has to release his hold on my neck. With his head between my legs, he stares up at me, his eyes blown wide with white sparks dotting the inky darkness.

He keeps his gaze locked on mine while delivering one slow, long lick up my center, his tongue parting me to curl around my clit with amazing accuracy. I reach down and wrap my fingers in his hair. Ares adjust his position when I tug, a small growl vibrating along his lips against me.

He brings me to the edge of an orgasm with his tongue, and my head is thrashing back and forth against the pillows. He'll be lucky if I don't have a handful of his hair when he's done. But then he slides his hand up my inner thigh and finds my opening with his fingers. My back arches clear off the bed. His tongue dips lower while his finger slides in and out of me. The orgasm catches me then, hard and fast. I come apart, and he prolongs it by pulling my clit into his mouth and sucking while I'm in the middle of coming.

Panting, Ares lifts his head, and his arm snakes over to the side of the bed where he grabs the foil packet. "Fuck, I don't want to put this on," he curses, and rips the condom open with his teeth, spitting the corner off to the side. I'm loose against the mattress, my entire body soft and satiated from his efforts.

Ares makes quick work of getting the condom on. His arms cage me in as he pushes back up against me. I'm so wet, I barely feel the cool dampness that comes with the rubber protection when he guides himself inside of me. He has to work himself in slowly, the orgasm has left me tighter than the last few times we've made love.

His forehead lands on mine, and his nostrils flare as his eyes search mine. "Am I hurting you?" he grates out through his clenched jaw.

"No." I shake my head and glide my hands over his sides until I reach his ass. I dig my fingernails in a little. Ares's head goes back and a groan leaves his lips.

"Goddamn, you were made for me." He pushes a little harder, his hips

almost jerking. I lift my head and bury my face in his neck. Ares reaches down and palms my butt cheek, lifting me so he can go deeper.

I bite the side of his neck. There's an edge of pain every time he bottoms out, but it feels incredible. I can't decide if I want him to push harder or just stay buried deep inside of me.

Ares slams himself forward, and I tighten my inner muscles and bite him even harder. His shoulders loosen as a heavy moan falls from his lips; still he quickens his pace, nearly frantic. I release him, afraid I might draw blood, but he palms the back of my head and holds me up to his neck. "Again, more," he orders. His voice is the deep, gravelly tone he only has when his powers are riding him hard.

I lick up his neck and bite him again, but this time I don't hold back. I sink my teeth in. Ares jerks his hips against mine hard enough that he pushes us both higher on the bed. His arm folds around the top of my head as he pounds into me, protecting my head from hitting the wall. My body can't even process the amount of pain and pleasure I'm experiencing. I spiral into an orgasm so hard I end up holding my breath until it passes, and I remember to breathe.

Gasping, I lick my lips and taste a metallic tang on my tongue. Damn, I think I made him bleed. Ares's body is heavy on mine, but his weight is more than welcome. I trace my nails over his back softly.

I feel a drop land on my upper chest, and when I pull back and look down, I see a thin rivulet of blood falling from Ares to me. "Shit, I'm sorry. I reach up and wipe my fingers over the small wound. I must have got him with one of my canines. Ares hisses and pulls back. When I look up, his lips are parted and he circles his hips. He's still inside me, and the movement makes me wince. I'm already a little sore.

"Sorry." His voice is dark, sexy.

"I'm the one that's sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Oh, sweetheart. Pain was not what I was feeling. Still isn't." He rolls over and drags me with him, sliding free of my body as he does.

Ares strokes his hands all over me as I catch my breath, my heart rate slows, and the only thing I want to do is sleep. He lifts his arm from under my head and stands up, I watch as his hands go in front of him and he lowers his head. Next thing I see is the condom dangling in his fingers before he heads to the bathroom. I rock my head against the pillow. I know I should clean up, but I really don't want to. Hell, I should probably change the sheets,

since that got kinda messy. Fucking, fabulously messy.

I groan and push myself up on my arms. Car doors closing outside spur me into action faster than the mess ever could. I lumber to the bathroom to find Ares leaning close to the mirror with the same cloth he cleaned me with against his neck. He smiles at me in the reflection.

“Sorry,” I mumble again. “I think the guys are home.”

“Okay, I’ll see if they need any help.” Ares drops the cloth into the sink and approaches me, completely comfortable with his nudity. He tips up my chin and gives me a devastatingly slow and sweet kiss. I’m breathless when he pulls back.

“Take your time.” He winks and disappears out of the bathroom, leaving me to watch him go.

CHAPTER 29

*S*tand back and watch as Ollie places the last bulb on the Christmas tree. The guys took me back to the home improvement store to buy the tree I fell in love with. Then they let me loose with an empty cart to fill with decorations.

I look around our living room. It's a hodgepodge of Christmas flare. Nothing matches like Rosa's stuff, but I love every single bauble.

"What do you think?" I grin at the guys.

Dante bumps his forehead into mine. "I think I like that smile," he whispers, before giving me a soft kiss.

"I think we could have gone with a bigger tree." Ollie stands back and looks over said tree with a critical eye.

"Shut up, it's amazing," Milo adds.

Ares walks in from the kitchen. He leans against the doorframe, not saying anything, but he has a small smirk on his lips, so I know he likes it.

"Now, it's time for..." I roll in my lips. I'm so excited that I give them jazz hands. "Christmas movies."

Ollie rolls his head back on his shoulders, then jerks back upright. "*Die Hard* is a Christmas movie, right?" He glances around.

Milo shoves Ollie's shoulder and smiles. "Maybe later, but she picked out a few already."

"Please, don't tell me any of them are on the Hallmark Channel?" Ollie gives me puppy dog eyes and puts his hands together in prayer.

I snort. "I don't even know what the Hallmark Channel is. I want to start with..." I grab the remote off the end of the sofa and point it at the TV. Selecting the DVR button, I scroll down until it stops on a little thumbnail

picture of a man wearing a ridiculous green elf costume. “This.” When I hit the button, the elf gets bigger, giving me the option to start the movie.

Milo laughs. “You should have known she wasn’t going to pick the sappy stuff.”

“Is this one okay?” I look around.

“Yeah, this is actually pretty funny. That guy, Will Ferrell, he has some amazing movies I’ll have to show you.” Dante sits on the couch, leaning back to get comfortable.

“Are you going to start it?” Ares asks when I set the remote down.

“I need to make some hot cocoa and snacks, plus we need to turn all these lights off.” I wave around the room.

“We just put the lights up.” Milo’s brows furrow.

“Not the Christmas lights—those stay on. The real lights,” I clarify.

“What kind of snacks do you want?” Ares inquires.

“I don’t know, what’s a Christmassy snack?” I glance around.

“Cookies, of course!” Ollie holds up one finger.

“I don’t think we even have any cookies.” I deflate a little.

Ollie comes over and wraps his arm around my shoulders. “We have to make the cookies, silly.”

That makes me smile. “Like homemade? Not a roll from the dollar store?”

Ollie rolls his eyes and scoffs, “Noooo, not for *Christmas* cookies. Let’s call Mom; she’ll have some recipes.” He leans in closer and whispers, “Then you can send DL to the store for ingredients.”

I snicker at Ollie’s abbreviated nickname for Ares. “DL can hear you,” Ares chimes in.

Ollie widens his eyes in mock fear that he was caught. I elbow him in the side jokingly. “I can go to the store, I don’t mind.”

“We can all go,” Ares interjects. “I’ll call Mamma, I want some of the ones she makes with the sprinkles.” He walks away, his phone already in hand.

“Ask about the fluffy ones,” Dante hollers over the back of the couch.

“My mom’s chocolate chip cookies sound good too,” Milo mutters to himself, pulling out his phone.

“Is it okay if we put the movie on hold until tonight?” Ollie asks, squeezing me closer.

“Absolutely,” I agree easily.

“Wait.” Dante leans forward. “Our kitchen sucks. Does the oven even work? And we don’t have one of those big mixer things Mamma uses.” I deflate again, he might have a point about the oven, since we haven’t even tried using it.

“Let’s go try it,” Ollie suggests.

Ares is sitting at the card table in a folding chair jotting down notes on a pad with his phone to his ear. He looks up briefly but keeps writing. Ollie tows me over to the stove and whispers out the side of his mouth, “Do you know how to use one of these things?”

“Kinda. We had a tiny oven in the motorhome. I didn’t use it much, though.” I find the oven dial on the back of the stove and turn it to three seventy-five. It ticks several times before a smooth whirring sound starts.

I glance over at Ollie. “So far, so good. Let’s give it a few minutes to see if it actually heats up.” He walks over behind Ares and examines the paper he’s writing on.

“Gimme a piece of paper.” He tugs at the pad, making whatever Ares is writing turn into a scribble.

Ares glares up at him and shoos him away. “Just a second.” He pauses. “No, not you. Oliver is causing trouble.” Another short pause. “Yeah, I got it. I’ll call if we need anything. *Ciao.*” He pulls the phone away and picks up the pad of paper, removing a sheet under his and handing it to Ollie. “You need to learn patience,” he admonishes.

“You should learn to multitask,” Ollie counters, taking the paper and rushing out of the kitchen.

Ares snags my waist with his arms as I move to pass by him. “He’s shortsighted.” He drags me closer and pulls me into his lap.

Dante comes into the kitchen. “Did you ask about the fluffy cookies?” He pulls out the seat next to us and grabs my feet, placing them in his lap.

“I did, we’re just waiting to see if the oven heats,” Ares informs him.



MILO LIFTS the pan out of the oven, his eyes squinting against the heat. The tray of chocolate chip cookies looks a little under done, but he assures me that’s how they should look. “That was my last batch, your turn,” he calls to Dante.

Ollie made his first. We've been at it for hours, between going to the store and making three different batches so far.

Dante comes in from the living room. "I think I'll wait until tomorrow, it's pretty late." I look up at the clock and see it is well after eleven, and I haven't even gotten to watch a movie yet. "I'll get up early, that way we can binge movies all day."

"Wake me up, okay?" I tell him, rising from the folding chair. He nods and heads back into the living room.

"I'll put these away as soon as they're cool enough. Go relax." Milo kisses the side of my head. "Thanks for making these with me, I had fun."

I give him a tight squeeze in return. "I can stay and help," I offer around a yawn.

"You've already helped Ollie and Ares. Go ahead, you've been in the kitchen since we got home."

I lean up on my toes and give him a kiss. Against his lips, I whisper, "I like yours the best so far." He grins down at me like I just handed him an award.

"I'll make them for you anytime you want." He licks his bottom lip and dips back in for a deeper kiss. Before I know it, he lifts me and sets my butt on the counter. I wrap my arms around his neck as he steps in close between my legs. I may be a little over making cookies, but Milo's cuddles are always welcome. I curl my legs up around his hips. Milo is the thickest of my boys, and I love the way it feels like he can surround me.

We spend several minutes trading caresses and kisses, and it's more than enough time for the cookies to have cooled. "I think everyone went to bed." Milo lifts me off the counter, so I wrap my legs around his waist and let him carry me into the living room. Sure enough, the lights are all off except the glow from the Christmas tree.

Milo lays me down on the floor next to the tree, the thick rug Ollie picked out a few weeks ago cushioning my back. This is the first time I've ever been with Milo without Ollie. I kinda thought they were a package deal.

The way he's looking down at me lets me know he doesn't think anything is missing. Milo takes his time slowly undressing me, and he lets me help him remove his shirt before sliding his sweat pants off. I spend a lot of time running my fingers over those deep indents on the insides of his hips before I take him in my hand. Milo shudders and bangs the back of his head on the floor.

I climb over him with my knees on either side of his hips. “Do you have protection?” I kiss his chest, my nipples dragging against the tightly packed muscles of his abdomen.

“I do,” he confirms, reaching for the small table next to the couch. He pulls out a condom.

“Do you guys just stash those all over the house now?” I grin down at him.

“Maybe.” He smiles up at me lopsidedly.

“I’m definitely not complaining.” I lean back down and kiss him.

Milo drops the packet and wraps his hands around my waist, kissing me reverently, like I still might break if he’s not careful. But it doesn’t bother me anymore. I love how thoughtful he is, how he openly shows me how much I mean to him now.

Eventually, I help him slide the condom on. I stay on top as he guides himself into me. My head falls back and a moan leaves my lips. Every inch of Milo is thick. I still when he’s seated as deep as he’ll go. Milo squeezes my hips and lifts me a little. His tight grip and the friction he’s creating between us has me panting.

The cords in Milo’s neck are tight, and his eyes are squeezed closed, but I know he’s not in pain. He sets a slow pace, not giving me much room to move considering how tightly he’s holding me.

I let my head fall back. Milo jerks upright and wraps his arms around me in a punishing grip, but I love every second. “I need you to come,” he tells me, staring into my eyes.

“Make me,” I counter, biting my lip. He groans and rolls us over. Both of his hands land on the floor over my shoulders, our lower bodies still connected. Milo leans down, almost in a push-up and rolls his hips against mine. “Oh. My. God. Do that again,” I pant.

He does, several more times in fact, until I’m almost clawing at his back. The moment my inner walls start to quiver with an orgasm, Milo buries his forehead against my neck and groans out his own release.

“Thank fuck,” he mumbles.

“What?” I run my fingers up and down his back lazily.

“I lasted longer than two minutes.” He glares at me like I’m to blame. “I need more practice,” he demands.

I chuckle my response. “I volunteer.”

“You better,” he grumbles, as he reaches between our legs and holds the

base of the condom before pulling out. He kneels between my legs and tugs the condom off, pinching the tip tightly. "Give me a second to take care of this and we can go to bed."

"Okay," I sigh, stretching.

I hear the kitchen faucet running for a few seconds, then the fridge opening and closing. Milo tiptoes back into the living room and leans down to scoop me off the floor. "I can walk," I mutter groggily.

"I thought you were sleeping," he whispers. "I had to put the cookies and stuff away. Sorry it took me so long."

I curl closer to him and let him carry me to bed, even though I just halfheartedly objected. Milo deposits me between Dante and Ollie, giving me a kiss on my cheek before climbing in beside Ollie.

I nestle deep between Dante and Ollie, luxuriating in my new life. I never could have imagined I being this happy or complete.

EPILOGUE

“Are you sure we have enough food?” I smooth my hands over my hips, straightening my shirt for the hundredth time.

Ollie grabs a hold of my shoulders. “Muenster.” He meets my eyes. “If this isn’t enough food, then someone must be bringing an army. It’s just your mom and dad.” He shakes me a little.

“Yeah, but...”

“No buts.” He reaches down and smacks my behind. “Except for yours, that is. Please stop worrying, okay?” he adds, sounding genuine.

I puff out my cheeks and blow out a deep breath. “You’re right, I’m freaking out.”

“I’m always right,” he teases me. “Now, you look beautiful, the house is clean enough to eat off the bathroom floor—or I could eat you off the bathroom floor anyway...” He tilts his head from side to side.

“*Oliver!*” I drag out his name slowly.

“What was I saying?” He acts like I was the one being rude interrupting him, giving me the side-eye. “Oh, yeah. Nobody cares about the food, Muenster. Every person that will be here today is coming because they love you and want to be with you.” He cradles my cheeks in his palms.

“Thanks, Ollie. I love you.” I sink into his touch.

“I love you too, Laura,” he whispers, with no humor left in his voice. After a brief kiss, he gives me a saucy wink and announces. “And I still want to eat you off the bathroom floor.” He throws his arms in the air like he can’t help himself.

I narrow my eyes at him but can’t hide my grin.

The front doorbell rings seconds later. I smooth my shirt again and turn to

face the door. Milo thunders down the stairs, Ares comes from the hall to our bedroom, and Dante rounds the doorway from the kitchen—all meeting me in the living room.

I feel several hands on my back and shoulders as Ares whispers, “You got this, *Cara*.”

I nod my head and take the two steps to the front door, but my hand freezes when I touch the knob. I take another deep breath before opening the door.

“Hi, Mom, Wyatt. Come in.”

THE END
FOR NOW

AFTERWORD

I hope you enjoyed reading Infinity Chronicles as much as I enjoyed writing it. Consider leaving a review.

I have a few POV's from the guys posted in my readers group on Facebook

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Gather round close, for I have a secret to tell.

Late at night, while everyone is sleeping, dreaming of white knights and fairytales. I'm making friends with the monsters.

They call to me, like finds like, right? My biggest secret, I'm the scariest monster I know.

I think I'm the bad guy.

MFMM Reverse Harem novel with adult themes not recommended for those under 18.

ALBANY WALKER

I am, a mother, a wife, a reader and a writer. My truth, I believe in real life happily ever afters, but you have to work for them.

If you enjoyed my book, or any other consider leaving a review.

For updates:

Albanywalkerauthor@gmail.com

<https://albanywalkerauthor.wixsite.com/mysite>

