

A PARANORMAL REVERSE HAREM SERIES



INFINITY
CHRONICLES

BOOK ONE



ALBANY WALKER

INFINITY CHRONICLES BOOK
ONE

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Infinity Chronicles Book One

A Paranormal Reverse Harem Story
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ONE

I look up to the last place I wanted to be—another new school, in another new town. I secure my frayed backpack over one slumped shoulder, not because it looks cool but because the other strap snapped two schools ago, or was it three? Didn't matter.

I let my gaze rove over the old building slowly. There is nothing special about the bland square box that is the home of the Franklin Comets, whose last feat of anything worth mentioning was twenty years earlier—if I'm to believe the crooked sign half hanging near the front doors.

Cinderblock walls, cobbled together with gray mortar, leach every bit of life from the surrounding area.

The grass that grew in scarce patches might have been green if there was enough of it to create a lawn. But in the shadow of the utilitarian building before me, it looks as dull as everything around it.

I drop my head and study the cracked sidewalk that leads up to a short flight of stairs, and ultimately to four dark brown doors at the entrance of the school.

I'd walked here early yesterday morning just to get an idea of how long it would take me to get here from the RV.

Twenty-three minutes was all that stood between me, and the only place I had to call home. The walk wasn't bad, not compared to how far we were parked from the last school I attended.

I'd arrived early enough that only a few cars are parked in the small lot adjacent to the school. I wanted enough time to slide past the other students without notice. That's one thing I'm exceedingly good at, being invisible.

My muddy blonde hair is pulled back in a loose ponytail at the nape of

my neck, letting the sides cover my ears and shield part of my face. My skin is clear but unexceptional I don't wear makeup, other than my trusty cupcake chapstick that is.

I'm not overly thin or thick. What girlish features I have are swallowed by my clothes that I've fashioned into a uniform of teenage acceptance of jeans and long sleeve tees ranging in shades of dull brown to drab blue. Never bright or fresh, not even black or white. Those colors draw attention, whether it be the dingy off-white that fabric seems to favor while being laundered at the coin wash or the inherent indecency that black seems to assume.

My goal is to remain unremarkable. I fight to keep my grades on an even keel of low Bs. In some classes, like literature or language arts, I try hard not to let myself strive for the grades I'd get if I applied myself. To draw attention would only expedite my mother's need to "move on."

A few years ago, when I hadn't yet grasped the reality of our nomadic existence, when I was still starry-eyed and naïve of my mother's wanderlust ways, I'd thought our life was an adventure.

I'd let my mouth and thoughts flit about freely for all my classmates and teachers to hear. That was back when I actually thought I could do something with my life, that I could be something more than my mother's daughter.

I'd shown off how easily schoolwork came to me. I even tested out of middle school, guaranteeing early graduation and an easy scholarship. But as soon as mom found out, we packed up our 1970's motor home and blew out of Tulsa faster than she could lecture me about the importance of anonymity.

For weeks after she drilled me about the art of invisibility.

It didn't matter that my scores could have gotten me a ticket out of this meager existence she seems to favor.

I learned quickly it was so much easier to fake mediocrity than it was to console my flighty mom when someone took the time to notice either of us. So, I embraced my forgettability.

Gathering my errant thoughts much like a child tugs a dandelion from a lawn, I shuffle over the broken slabs of concrete to the crumbling stairs, which will inevitably lead to depressing linoleum tiled hallways and a predictable nondescript office with uninterested staff trying to make it through another Monday.

Grabbing the first door handle, I'm surprised to find it locked tight. Unsure, I begin to move down the line, tugging each door lightly before the

last one finally gives way, allowing me into the quiet halls.

It only takes a second to notice the overly large wall of windows spanning from waist high to the ceiling. As I make my way to the office, I see the shine of thin strands of metal laced through the glass, promising security, but from what? A bunch of high school students?

The heavy wooden door into the front office opens soundlessly, but still draws the attention of the middle-aged woman shuffling papers at a high counter.

Her lips thin, as do her eyes, when she spots me.

Quickly, she glances at a large circular clock that is caged behind rusted metal before looking back down to me. Her gaze is aggravated and assessing. I'm sure she thought she'd have at least ten more minutes before having to deal with the student body.

With a sigh she lifts the few papers she's still clutching and packs them onto the counter before her, keeping them hoisted, and forming a useless barrier between us.

“Yes?” she utters the word in exasperation more than anything else, and it is the only greeting I get. My gaze falls to her hands, still grasping the loose sheets of paper.

“Laura Fallen. New registration, ” I mutter, still focusing on her hands and avoiding eye contact. My words are soft, not overly polite nor rude, forgettable. Her thick fingers drop the small stack of papers, ruining all the straightening she'd done, and she paws at an upright filing system. I'm handed a well-worn manila envelope.

As I reach forward, one of the paperstucked inside slips free and swirls down to the brown industrial carpet below. I grasp the file tightly before crouching down to retrieve the fallen document.

“Your transcripts came over incomplete. There's no record of yearly pictures or testing scores.” Her eyes scour over me as I stand again. I don't tell her that I've always been conveniently absent on picture days and most days any school wide tests were taken. I say nothing but lift my shoulders in a small move of innocence.

“Sorry?” I warble back. I see her hair sway as she shakes her head in annoyance.

“Wish I didn't need to do everyone's job!” she complains, then adds, “I'll be needing that folder back. Your locker assignment and schedule are yours to keep.”

When I leave the office, I notice there's a stillness in the halls as I journey up to the second floor. Most of the classroom doors are open, with tall gray trash bins left empty adjacent to the entrances. My locker is tucked away at the end of hallway, right next to a rear stairwell. Intrigued by the possibilities of where they lead, I open my locker quickly just to make sure the combination works then close it back up, keeping my backpack with me.

When I reach the bottom of the back stairway, it spills to the lower level and an exit. This will definitely be a quicker route, which I file away for later.

As I make my way to my homeroom, the halls slowly start to fill. I manage to successfully filter through groups of kids with no one pointing out that a new student has joined their ranks. Cautiously, I linger on the fringes until I feel an acceptable amount of time has passed so I won't be the first or last student to enter the room.

I place the half sheet of paper with empty columns on my teacher's desk for his initials. I've been to several schools where they require new students to return similar forms after the first day of school, whether they think the kids will skip or are too inept to find their classes, I don't know, but it's a silly practice.

The older man behind the desk looks at me before scribbling his initials in the appropriate column.

"Alphabetic assigned seating Miss Fallen, but with late enrollment I'm afraid I'll have to stick you in the back." From the corner of my eye I notice his eyes narrow on me, wondering and assessing if I'll cause trouble back there.

I give a nod and walk over to the last row of five and sit in the desk farthest from the front. A few students peer at me as I pass, but my hair is still secured limply over my shoulders, the loose hold of a rubber band offering some anonymity from the curious stares of my classmates.

Thankfully the homeroom teacher doesn't acknowledge me again throughout the short period. I know at some point today at least one teacher will address me and my newness, thinking they're somehow being helpful instead recognizing it for the embarrassment it actually is. I'm grateful to Mr. Wilber for not doing that.

As the day slides by I get a few looks and hear a some whispers, but not much more than I'm normally used to from always being the new kid.

I was a little surprised when Mom told me where we'd be moving this time. She usually picks a place that just borders on being a big city; a town

barely large enough so our existence won't be noticed. But the town of Canton is more than just shy of being a big city, hell they don't even have a Walmart.

Initially it concerned me that I'd stand out more in the smaller school. But I needn't have worried, because my hard-earned invisibility works better than I'd expected.

Lunch always sucks for the first few days, the days before I've sussed out the best places to eat my bagged PB&J in peace while I read whatever book has my attention for the day. Today is no different.

They split lunch into two groups: A and B. I got the former, so as my fourth hour lets out I meander out slowly, taking my time collecting my pencils and newly assigned book from my desk. After clearing the door, I head to the most obvious choice for all the book nerds worldwide: the library.

Unfortunately, there's a sign posted which reads 'closed for lunch periods,' so I turn on my heel and head back the way I came. Maybe I can just go to my locker and camp out on the floor. An idea strikes as I make my way up the corridor. The lunchroom needs to be avoided at all costs, so I need to think of a new place to eat lunch. I pass a few classes still in session, but mostly my walk is uninterrupted. When I look past the bank of lockers that hold mine, I see the empty stairwell. A small smile lifts my lips when I peer down to the landing that separates the two flights of stairs. If I sit on one of the first few steps, I'll easily be able to notice anyone coming from the hall or the stairs below.

With my back to the wall I munch slowly on my sandwich while it's still half in the sandwich bag, and flip through my book to find whatever scrap of paper I've tucked into the pages to mark my spot.

Luckily I was able to finish my lunch with no interruptions, and I'm just gathering my things when I hear voices coming from below. I start working faster to tuck my stuff away when a soft voice reaches my ears. I can't make out what she says, but it's quickly followed by a deep chuckle.

Great, I've wandered into someone's make out spot. Before I can cram my brown sack into my book bag, heavy steps land on the stairs.

I barely manage to sling my bag over my shoulder when a dark head appears on the landing and I drop my eyes to the steps below me. I'm already facing down, and I think passing him would be easier than rushing back up to my locker at this point, so I wedge myself as near to the right wall as possible and begin to descend the stairs.

As he looks up, I recognize the moment he notices me. His steps falter, if only briefly, before resuming his unhurried pace. When we pass, his head turns and follows me. I never look up, pretending not to notice him. His musky cologne lingers in the passageway as I round the landing.

Standing at the base of the stairs is a blonde girl peering up at me. My eyes dart to the ground quickly and she takes a breath like she might speak to me when my foot hits the last step, but I keep walking. As I turn down the next hallway, I catch a glimpse of her still watching me before I move out of sight, her eyes narrowed in speculation.

Everything is fine until fifth hour, which is when it happens. I've settled into a peaceful acceptance that I might just make it through the day without any teachers prompting me to spill why or how I ended up in their school. But then it does.

Mrs. Yarro, a youngish teacher with an easy smile, moves to the front of her desk and leans her rump against it, crossing her ankles. "So, guys, I'm sure you've noticed we have a new classmate today. I hope all of you are making her feel welcome."

At her announcement a few heads swivel around the room. Looking for the new student that I'm sure most of them had no clue was among them.

I'm tempted to ignore her, but I know that doesn't work because I've tried it before. So, I gaze at the front of the room without making eye contact with anyone and lift my hand in a small wave.

"Laura, tell us where are you from?" Mrs. Yarro prods.

At this point I don't even remember, so I tell her the last place we moved from. "Michigan," I respond loud enough so I won't need to repeat myself. Mrs. Yarro nods her head encouragingly, wanting me to add more. When I don't, she folds her hands together and looks around the room.

Taking mercy on me after one last look in my direction she says, "All right then Laura, we're happy to have you. Jimmy can you tell me where we left off on Friday?"

"Um, uh," the guy in front of me stutters as he turns back around to his own desk and fumbles with a textbook.

With a heavy sigh Mrs. Yarro answers her own question, "Chapter twenty-four people! Remember we're having a test Thursday. I'll expect everyone to be prepared."

I get a few more looks throughout the class period but nothing I couldn't handle. My last class of the day is the only elective available to me, art. To

say I lack the creative gene would be too simple; frankly, I'm completely out of my element with anything artistic.

The teacher, a mild looking man in tan corduroy pants and a button-up shirt, is standing near a lab table. *Oh no, these are the worst.* I really don't want to share a table with anyone; it's hard to ignore someone sitting at the same table with you.

"Laura," he addresses me in a smooth tone. I nod, stepping close enough that we won't draw too much attention from the others coming into the room. "I have an open seat for you right here." He gestures to a table at the far left of the room. "We've been working on portraits for the display case at the front of the school for the past few weeks, after everyone arrives I'll get you started, and we'll see if we can get you caught up."

I let my bag slide down my arm and to the floor next to the stool. The other seat at the table is still empty when I drop into mine. Do I dare hope it will remain that way?

I take advantage of the fact that few other students haven't arrived yet and let my eyes scan the room.

The ceiling is high, leaving exposed gray beams crisscrossing above me, every inch of wall space from about ten feet down is covered with layers and layers of artwork. Some childlike with just smears of colors on aging construction paper, others you can tell the artist has real talent.

It's the most vivid place in the whole school; while everything else bleeds gray and bland, this room erupts in colors. It's a little dizzying honestly.

The scrape of a stool jolts me from my stupor as I stared at a particularly dark drawing. It almost covers the white paper completely in charcoal, but it still invokes a feeling of emptiness in me. I can't make out the images from my vantage point, but the desolation spans the room. Instinctively, I look over to the sound that disturbed me, and when I catch sight of a slightly scruffy chin, I snap my head back to face the front of the class.

I can't believe I was so distracted by the sketch, I didn't realize students were filling seats around me.

Mr. Adams greets the class by clapping his hands together to get everyone's attention. "All right guys, your portraits are due soon. I'll make my way around the room to see if anyone needs a little guidance, if I don't make it to you today, it'll be first thing tomorrow. I want to see the best you have to give me."

He makes his way over to my table, already carrying a large, thick piece

of white paper. Mr. Adams leans his palms on the surface, and his eyes meet mine briefly before I move my gaze to the paper resting on the black desktop. “We've been focusing mostly on technique over the last few weeks, learning proportions and facial perspective. How familiar are you with portrait work?”

Looking at his thin neck and rounded chin, I whisper, “Not at all really. I haven't had art in a few years.”

“Ah, so no hope you'll be the next big E.J. Hill? Give Dante here something to work for?” I'm confused until I hear a snort next to me.

“Not a chance Mr. A,” my neighbor's deep voice floats over me softly.

“Well I can always hope, can't I Dante?” the teacher responds lightly. After asking me a few more questions, the teacher leaves me with the paper and a sketching pencil, along with the overwhelming task of beginning my first portrait. I'm so lost.

TWO

I walk home unhurriedly. Now that school is over for the day, I have a little free time to analyze the day.

My tablemate in art didn't utter a word as he worked on a beautiful picture of a woman. I had to stop myself from staring at his hands, moving across the paper so gracefully, at least three times. I finally understood what Mr. Adams was referring to when he was goading him. He must be beyond talented if what I'd seen today is any indication of his ability.

My meager drawing consisted of a few rough shapes, a large oval for the face of a pretty girl I found in a stack of magazines Mr. Adams said I could use for reference, and a trapezoid, the beginning form of her neck. I felt rather foolish with that guy Dante, beside me.

He seemed pretty popular, in art class at least four or five people greeted him by name when they moved around the room. He never did more than nod his head or a grunt in acknowledgment in return though. He seemed really taken with what he was doing.

When I get home, I know I'll find Mom either passed out on the couch, or bustling around our tiny home on wheels.

She only seems to have two speeds anymore. Lord knows she hasn't been sleeping at night for a while. I have to admit though, lately she's been off, even for her.

A large wooden sign that's lost most of its paint announces Turtle Park Resort as I pass from the black tar road to the gravel driveway of our new temporary home.

A "resort" it is not. Most of the sites are empty, and tall grass pokes

through the gravel pads where most people park their RVs for a weekend camping trip. There are a few trailers permanently parked in the premium spots near the small man-made pond close to the front entrance.

It might even be quaint if it wasn't all so familiar, if we—like the others—only roughed it for the weekend, or even the summer. But we've been doing this for as long as I can remember. Trading one RV park for the next. Endless days of echoing shower stalls where you can never get any privacy, and dingy bathrooms covered in mildew and spiders.

I'm relieved the walk to school isn't too far this time; the busses never stop by these places for pickups no matter how far they are from the school.

Our site is secluded in the back of the park, where trees border one side while empty flat pads surround the others. Our motor home looks abandoned as I approach.

The windows are all closed and covered with the heavy drapes Mom put up several years ago.

Easily finding the small key ring in my pocket, I tap quickly on the door before unlocking it, announcing myself.

Surprisingly, mom's not asleep on the couch when I get in, and I don't see her anywhere in the tiny space. Maybe she laid down in the one bed we have, one I've tried to get her to sleep in for the past few months.

I peek back toward the curtained off area noting it is, in fact, closed.

I ease my backpack off, dropping it quietly on the tiny dining table not wanting to wake her up.

I have homework in two classes that should only take me a few minutes before I need to head back out and hand in the few applications I managed to collect Sunday afternoon.



THE NOTE I LEFT ON THE TINY COUNTER IS STILL THERE WHEN I RETURN, AND Mom is still nowhere in sight. Getting a little worried, I tread to the back where I usually sleep and brush the thin curtain barrier aside to peer at the small double bed.

Mom is half on her stomach, half on her side, sprawled over the flimsy mattress. Her messy hair, which should be a dark shade of blonde, looks taupe instead. Her face is buried so I can only make out one eyelid that is

crisscrossed with dark purple veins, giving her a ghoulish look.

I remember when she used to shine; it makes my heart sad to see her like this.

When I was younger, she always seemed so full of life, so vibrant with all her bright flowing dresses and multicolored beads. I can't remember a specific time when things changed, when she became this shell of herself, but my memories of what she once was are fading, just like she is.

I leave her to sleep, and a small box of mac 'n' cheese later, I'm trying to get comfortable on our small couch and while fighting off sleep so I can finish this chapter. It's near eleven and I've been getting increasingly worried Mom isn't awake yet, but I leave her, figuring she must need the rest.

Sometime in the middle of the night Mom wakes me up. My book is open on my stomach and my mouth feels dry, so I know I've been asleep for a while.

“Oh honey, I’m sorry to take the bed. You go on back and get some sleep now.” I'm not sure if I give more than a grunt of acceptance before lumbering to the bed and slipping back to sleep.

My alarm is an old-fashioned thing, it runs on batteries and the sound comes from a tiny hammer twitching back and forth between two bells. It always does the job of waking me, even when the batteries are aging, making the toll and time run a little slow.

I roll over, looking toward the tiny window next to my bed. The sky is still dark but I need to shower so I don't let myself fall back into the dreamless sleep that is so welcoming.



THE SOUTH CAROLINA SUN WARMS MY NECK AND BACK AS I MAKE MY WAY to school. I'm actually grateful we left Michigan before it got too cold; believe it or not by mid October it's usually pretty chilly there.

I don't arrive at school as early today. I need to find that sweet spot where I don't have to rush to class, but I'm not too early either. It can take a few days to master. I want to be in class before the bell rings, but not overly early so the kids have reason and the time to talk to me.

From an old sparse oak tree I'm able to watch my peers without their notice. I see all the prerequisite cliques as they meet up for the day.

I've dubbed all the groups with my own names, whether they actually fit in those categories is another thing altogether. For example, the cheer or pep squad, as I like to call them, are the popular girls, the girls that run the school and know it. They are always the first group I scope out, and stay far away from.

I spy the pretty blonde from the stairwell yesterday and watch her. I'm not disappointed when she saunters up to a group of three girls waiting by a new model mustang. Seconds later she breaks from the group and sashays her way to a group of guys.

Now, that group has me scratching my head. I can't make out their faces from here, but their clothes and demeanor wouldn't suggest they aren't actually a group. There's a tall beefy guy with dark hair, his back is to me but he's wearing dark jeans, a leather jacket, and boots: bad boy.

The person next to him I almost mistook for a girl at first glance, but I was very wrong. Blond hair, long blond hair that reaches past his wide shoulders. He wears light fitted jeans, without being overly tight and cuffed at the bottom, and his red and black plaid shirt is rolled to the elbows: skater boy.

The third guy is a half head shorter than the others. His kind of short caramel brown hair is lifted in the front and somewhat styled. He's wearing gray sweatpants and a green t-shirt that looks either a few years old or a few sizes too small: jock.

All these things mean these boys are definitely popular the upper echelon of the school, and probably run in the same crowd, but the way they haven't acknowledged anyone else and their close proximity to each other makes me believe they're truly friends. Not just saying hello in passing, which seems kind of strange considering I could place them with their perspective groups easily as I peer around the parking lot and front lawn.

As cheer girl gets closer to their group her features blur along with the distance.

Most of the kids are now streaming into the doors so I don't have time to watch which of the boys in the group she belongs with.

At lunch I don't linger in the stairwell as long as I did yesterday. I have my paper sack and book gathered up before the warning bell. I don't want to be caught hanging out when some couple needs a secluded spot to make out again.

I still hear a few whispers and some of the bolder kids even start to say

hello to me. I always respond back with just enough to show I'm not ignoring them, but never stick around long enough for them to actually talk to me. Soon enough they won't bother speaking to me, and after that I'll be able to walk the halls invisible.

I'M HOPELESSLY STARING AT THE GLOSSY MAGAZINE PHOTO I CHOSE FOR MY project muse, and wondering how the hell I'll ever get my shapes to look anything like the beautiful girl in the picture, when I hear a soft warm, "Hey."

I have to walk a fine line to become nonessential. I can't just ignore him, then people would start to think I'm stuck up. My approach is like threading a needle, I have to be shy and awkward enough that they don't befriend me, and quiet enough that they forget me.

As I've gotten older, it's pretty easy with boys. As long as I don't get friendly with them they usually are the first to wipe me from the radar.

"Hello," I all but whisper back without lifting my eyes from my project. I can feel him watching me, so I continue to stare at my almost blank paper.

When a few moments pass without him speaking again, I think I'm in the clear. That is until Mr. Adams comes over to check my progress, or rather lack thereof.

"Laura, I'm starting to think you were telling the truth about not being the artist I thought you were." His tone is light and teasing.

I shrug somewhat limply. "Yeah, I'm pretty lost here," I respond back, watching his blue paisley tie which is layered over a cream colored button-up shirt.

"Well it's a good thing I had the exceptional foresight to seat you with my star pupil. What do you say Dante, can you give Laura some guidance on her next step?"

Dante sits quietly beside me. Mortification hits me fast. I can feel the heat invading my cheeks and down my neck. "Mr. Adams, I still have to finish this." He gestures down to his work of art. His hand, stained black from charcoal, fans over the gorgeous woman looking up from the paper.

"That's okay," I rush out. I know he doesn't want to be burdened with helping me. "Honestly I'll manage," I continue even softer.

My shoulders are slumped forward, trying to make myself smaller so I can forget how embarrassing it is I don't have to try hard for people to not want to be around me.

They're both quiet as I pull my drawing closer and hunch over my work.

“Laura,” his voice tight, my teacher begins, “I have some examples of proportion division. Those will give you a better idea how to split the face, and where to place the features.” I peer up at him and meet his eyes briefly if only to convey my gratitude.

“Come on, we’ll make a transfer paper too. That way you can get some ideas on top of what you’ve already got started on here.”

He pulls my paper from the table and I follow him to the front of the room, where he drops my unfinished work on his desk before gathering a thin sheet of clear paper, then combs through a filing cabinet in the corner.

The noise level in the class stays at a low hum of scratching pencils and quiet voices as I wait beside Mr. Adams’s desk. He returns quickly and motions me forward.

“All right, so here are a few illustrations on facial proportions.” He spends the next ten minutes going over techniques on dividing the face down the middle then splitting it horizontally so I know where to place the hairline, eyes, nose, and mouth. When he’s done, I also have a traced outline, perfectly proportioned, on the clear sheet that fits directly over what I started yesterday, which he said I could use as a reference guide.

The bell rings before I have a chance to make it back to my seat. It sends a shot of relief through me that I won’t have to sit next to Dante after that super embarrassing moment.

I don’t blame him for not wanting to help, I get that he has his own work to do. I wish the teacher hadn’t even asked.

I’m slow going back to collect my things from the table, but Dante is still there, almost like he’s waiting for me to return. “Hey, sorry about—”

“Dante!” I hear a shrill voice shout into the door. He turns away and I use the distraction to grab my things, hustle behind him, and around the room. I’m sliding past the blonde girl in the doorway when I hear him almost growl in what sounds like an exasperated, “What?”

I’m out the door, dashing down the hall too fast to hear her response.

I stop at a small diner on the way home. I turned in an application here yesterday and I’m hoping the manger will have had time to look it over, without having a phone for them to call for an interview, I have to be careful enough not to make a pest of myself when checking the status of an application, making sure they know I’m interested in getting the job even though I don’t have any contact information. Some places dismiss me

immediately, thinking that without a phone or a permanent address I won't be worth the effort. I really hope the diner isn't one of those, because it's in a great location halfway between home and school.

A bell tinkles as I push through the door. Only a few people are sitting at the long counter lined with swiveling stools. Even fewer people are dotted throughout the booths along the windows.

Maggie, the older woman I gave my application to yesterday, smiles when she sees me. I take it as a good sign, it's not the 'I'm sorry it's not going to work out smile,' but rather a genuine smile which lights up her face.

"How soon can you start?" She asks when she's done refilling a cup of coffee for a man sitting up at the bar.

The relief is swift and immediate. "As soon as you need me."

THREE

Wednesday I have a small setback in my plan to fall into obscurity. Somehow, I've gained the attention of cheer girl. I have a sinking suspicion that not only was she the girl from the stairwell, but also the girl from the end of art class yesterday. When you're constantly looking at the floor, it's hard to recall faces. She's definitely not someone whose radar I want to be on though.

"Hey, new girl. Laura, right?" Her voice is light, but she sounds a little winded. She probably rushed to catch up with me. I turn my head in her direction just enough so she knows I'm not ignoring her, but not enough to fully focus on her either.

"So what's your story?" I wish she would leave me alone so I could go to the stairwell for my lunch.

"What do you mean?" I sound timid, even to my own ears.

"Well, why'd you move here? Where are you living? Got a boyfriend? Maybe looking for a new one?"

I lift my shoulders in a shrug and answer the only question she really cares about. "No boyfriend, new or otherwise."

We're getting close to the stairs that lead up to my locker. I'm hoping she'll leave soon so I can go eat my lunch in peace. She stops and turns to face me fully. Most of the other kids are headed in the opposite direction to the cafeteria, so we're mostly alone. "Well I do. Have a boyfriend that is, Dante."

"That's nice," I offer in a small voice. I know what she's doing. She really shouldn't bother; I'm no threat to her.

"He told me you were trying to get him to help with your art project." Her

arms get folded over her chest as she stares at me. I don't meet her eyes but give her my full attention. I can't believe he told her that. First off, I didn't ask him for help at all, the teacher did. Heat invades my cheeks, I bet they're already pink.

"The teacher asked him, not me," I defend, even though I should just let her speak her piece so we can move on.

"Yeah okay," she says in a mocking tone like she thinks I'm lying. After a few tense moments of us both just standing there, she shakes her head and turns away back to the direction we came. "Just stay away from him," she sneers, delivering her final words with her back to me while walking away.

All through lunch, instead of happily being pulled into the pages of the book I am reading about a girl whose touch kills, I'm fighting off an indignant embarrassment. What would make him tell her I was asking him for help? Why even bring it up? I spend my thirty-five minutes dreading my final hour even more than I already did.



WHEN HE PULLS OUT HIS STOOL, I'M ALREADY BUSYING MYSELF WITH FACIAL proportions. Having the transfer sheet helps a bunch. I can line it up with my drawing and use a write and wipe marker to practice the techniques Mr. Adams showed me yesterday.

I'm really expecting Dante to ignore me. "Seems like you're doing okay," he says quietly in a deep low voice. I nod with no other acknowledgment. He sits, waiting for a few more moments before standing, going to grab his project from the back of the room.

Everything seems to be going okay until I reach a spot where I'm not sure how to proceed. I have all the proportions lightly mapped out, and now I need to actually start on the details of the eyes, nose, and mouth.

Mr. Adams is at the front of the room, having already walked around to all the different tables a few times. He seems to be free enough where I could ask how to proceed. I set my pencil down and slide off the stool, grabbing my work as I go.

"Laura," he greets me. When I put my page on the desk, he looks it over with a critical eye. "Not bad, not bad at all. You think you're ready to move on to the next step?"

I give a quick nod and Mr. Adams gathers two sheets from his filing cabinet. “Go ahead and grab the transfer, that way we can practice eye shape.”

Heading back to the desk with Mr. Adams, I know Dante is watching me, even when I'm not looking at him, I can tell his face is trained in my direction.

“One of the most important factors in getting the eyes realistic, is the iris and lid shape. When you actually look at someone,” his eyes peer at mine, “you rarely actually see the full iris.” Mr. Adams eyes round before they twitch back and forth between my eyes. He clears his throat, “Unlike your eyes, your model’s eyes are the practically covered with her lids, and it obscures some of the top of her iris.”

Mr. Adams spends a few minutes going over a few different eye shapes with me using the transfer over top of my portrait. I catch him glancing at me a few times while he speaks. People rarely notice I have two slightly different colored eyes, but he has. I can always tell by the way their eyes flick back and forth between mine.

Back at the table, I'm still trying to decide if the girl I'm using as my model actually has almond eyes or not. It's hard to get the line thin enough using the marker, but I practice it a few times, drawing and wiping it away repeatedly.

The pencil seems light in my hand as I sketch light lines on the real paper. Without the eyelid and eyeball the image staring back at me is slightly haunting. I get little else done before Mr. Adams tells the class to put our projects away before the bell rings. I load the practice sheet and the two pages he gave me in my bag to use at home, before moving toward the back of the room to put my drawing away. Once I've done that, most of the other kids are already back in their seats, having already put their work into the numbered totes in the back.

I notice Dante avidly watching me, but I keep my eyes on my bag, ignoring him.

“Laura,” he says my name like a question when I get back to the table. Great, I was hoping I could ignore him altogether.

I clear my throat. I haven't spoken in hours. “Yeah?” It comes out a little croaky

“About yesterday. Sorry about that...” he trails off for a second, his gruff voice almost making it sound like he's growling at me. “You seem to be

catching on pretty well.”

I'm starting to put the pieces together as he tugs a leather jacket over his shoulders. Dark pants, black t-shirt. I think he's the bad boy from the mismatched group this morning. So, he's who cheer girl was heading for.

“It's fine. I didn't know Mr. Adams would ask you to help me. Sorry he bothered you with that.” I should have just accepted his apology and moved on, but I find the words falling from my lips without thought. With my backpack over a shoulder I face forward, twining my fingers together in my lap. It's the most I've spoken to anyone in school in a while.

Sometimes I wonder why I bother anymore. Every town is the same, we roll in, find some seedy RV park to set up in. I find a small-time job that barely manages to keep food on the table.

Then there's school. Where I spend my time walking the halls like a shadow, just so my mom won't panic and pick us up and leave even sooner than the three months we usually average.

I can't count how many times I thought about quitting, and getting my GED so I wouldn't have to put up with going to school every day. Then I might get a better job.

Something stops me every single time I close to giving up. I know it's the false hope of being normal someday. Of finding a place where mom can actually relax and settle down. A place where I could graduate and find a small local college, a place where I could make a friend.

I catch movement from the corner of my eye. Dante is rubbing the back of his neck with his head leaning over the table, trying to look at me. No, that's wrong. He's trying to see me.

I turn my face just enough, a little confused about why he's watching me so intently.

My heart starts beating faster. I want to turn away from him. I want the bell to ring so I can stop staring at him. His mouth opens, his lips barely parted, and he stays like that for a moment, like he wants to talk but doesn't.

“I should have helped,” he mutters almost like he's speaking to himself, voice soft and deep all at once. It's a strange combination. Usually someone with such a deep tone sounds booming, louder than needed, but not him. Everything he says comes out more like a soft growl. You know the sound, when a dog is thrilled but growls anyway. That's what he sounds like to me. Not that I think he is overly happy, that's just the only way I can describe his voice.

I start to shake my head in denial. Ready to insist he shouldn't. He speaks before I can.

"I'll help," he offers while we're still stuck looking at each other.

It's the longest I've let myself actually focus on someone in a long time.

His dark hair is a little messy, not styled messy, more like he ran his hands through it this morning instead of a brush. His eyes are a strange hazel color, almost amber brown. He has sculpted cheekbones and a strong jaw, leading down to a thick neck and wide shoulders.

He's definitely handsome. No wonder cheer girl's so territorial.

The bell rings and I actually jump from the shrill sound.

Unnerved, I snatch my bag from the floor and flee the room like it's a blaze. The whole thing probably only lasted under a minute, but I feel strangely exposed. Like that was enough time for him to know my every secret.



THE DINER IS SLOW, I DON'T THINK THEY REALLY NEEDED TO HIRE ME. I'M rolling silverware into paper napkins when the door tingles a happy chime.

Two guys come in—one talking over his shoulder, barely looking around—they nab the first booth.

I pull my note pad from my apron and approach.

"Hi," they both peer up when I speak.

"Where's Maggie?" the boy with short dark hair asks.

Looking down at the table I answer, "She's in the back."

"She hired someone?" he questions his friend, whose long blond hair slides over his shoulder when he shrugs, then looks back up at me. He's almost pretty, his bone structure is crazy masculine, but his features are undoubtedly beautiful. Soft full lips, long dark eyelashes, and a perfect nose.

Distracting myself, I scribble on my pad. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"When did this happen, when did you start?" the other guy asks. I know better than to stare at them again.

"Only yesterday," I answer softly.

"Why didn't she tell us she needed someone? She knows we would have helped."

They're back to speaking to each other. I can hear how concerned they sound. It's almost like they've forgotten I'm standing here.

The whomp of the swinging door leading to the kitchen grabs my attention. I bite the corner of my lip, I haven't even managed to take their drink orders. If these guys offer to help Maggie out, I'm more than likely going to lose my job.

“Hey boys,” she greets them affectionately.

“Gran,” dark haired boy greets.

“Ollie, you and Milo better not be giving Laura a hard time.” Both of them react to her saying my name. Glancing up at me quickly.

“Can I get you something to drink?” I ask again, hoping they answer so I can walk away.

“Coke,” they both say at the same time.

I turn without writing it down and shove my notepad in my apron. By the time I return, Maggie is leaning her hip on the booth's high-backed seat. She and the guys carried on a quiet conversation for a few seconds.

As I near they all look up. I flush from the attention.

Maggie backs away so I place the glasses in front of them. “Can I take your order, or...?” I look at Maggie, wondering if she wants to take it herself, feeling uncertain. She hasn't watched me this much since I started yesterday. She took me at my word that I knew what I was doing.

“You go ahead Laura, these boys won't give you any more trouble,” she answers, understanding my question all too easily.

I'm back to rolling napkins and frequently checking their drinks to make sure they don't get too low when Gus, the guy from the grill in the back, hits the bell unnecessarily. There are only a few people here, so I could tell right away when an order was up.

I grab a ketchup bottle from under the counter and stuff it in my apron before grabbing the tray.

Their table quiets as I approach. “Anything else?” I ask while placing the ketchup on the table. They both utter a quick denial before I turn to check on my other two tables.



I WAVE A QUICK GOODBYE TO MAGGIE WHILE SHE LOCKS THE DOOR BEHIND

me. The front lot is empty as I cross the gravel heading toward the street. The sun is gone for the day, leaving the road back to the Turtle Park Resort dark. Thankfully I won't have a far walk home.

Mom is asleep on the couch when I get in. Her stringy hair half covering her face and her arm hangs low to the floor.

I sigh, tired from my long day but relieved she's sleeping again, that's easier than if she was awake and waiting for me.

I quietly gather my bath kit and make the short walk to the camp showers. Thankfully it's not too grungy and I feel cleaner after getting out, that doesn't always happen at these places.

With nothing else to do I grab my transfer sheet and practice a few different eye shapes. I'm definitely not an artist but with all the steps set out for each piece of face, I feel a sense of accomplishment with what I've got done and capable of turning in something that isn't horrible.

I roll over and hit the light switch next to the built in lamp.

The room falls dark quickly. I can hear Mom's soft snores from the couch. I'm a little concerned with how much she seems to be sleeping lately, but figure she's still catching up after her last manic episode when she barely slept at all. With these thoughts on my mind, I drift off to sleep.

I jolt awake, my heart pounding out a heavy rhythm. Gasping for breath I realize that I was dreaming, but can't for the life of me remember what it was that had me so frightened.

A quick glance at the alarm clock shows me it's almost time to get up anyway. I throw myself back onto the mattress and let my heart rate slow down while letting myself wake up properly.

FOUR

I can't wait for this day to be over.

Instead of everyone forgetting about me, and the new girl curiously wearing off, I've become *that* girl.

You know, the one all the other girls make a target of. The one they say nasty things about, just loud enough for you to hear. Well, it's not all the girls, obviously. It's only the girls I would consider in the popular groups.

I'm also pretty sure I have cheer girl to thank for my newfound notoriety.

Just as I'm rounding the corner I feel a slight shove on my back. With my head down and my book bag clutched to my chest, it's just enough to send me sprawling onto the floor. My knees and palms take the brunt of the fall but they don't hurt nearly as bad my pride does.

Giggles fill the surrounding space while I gather my backpack and the few things that came out of it. My trace paper for art being one of them.

"Oh, look!" I hear conspiratorially. "She must be Special Ed or maybe she's just an idiot."

Louder giggles. "Yeah and a mute too," another voice chimes in.

I'm just about to stand when I feel a hand slide under my arm. With an electric jolt, I jerk my shoulder forward, pulling away and wondering what that was, and what they're planning next.

But the hand stays with me and someone comes up from behind.

"Stand up," he all but snarls while lifting me from the floor. I look up at his face, but he's staring at the three girls that were surrounding me. Then his eyes scan the hall, which is filled with onlookers.

His jaw tightens and so does his grip on my upper arm. I wince, lifting my shoulder, hoping he'll release the pressure so the strange static feeling will

abate.

His tawny eyes immediately find mine, and then he lets go with a jerking motion. He takes one menacing step toward the girls right as the bell rings. Everyone scatters.

Dante bends down, grabbing my bag from the floor before shoving it at me. I can't tell who exactly he's pissed off at, but I'm guessing everyone, me included.

I pull my bag to my chest and drop my face, ready to head to my next class.

Hours later, in art class, Dante is still aggravated. He tosses his stuff on the table, and his frequent sighs leave no room for doubt. Or maybe this is his everyday attitude and I'm paying more attention. His pencil seems to scratch across his paper instead of the graceful sketching I've noticed before.

"They would probably leave you alone if you didn't make yourself such an easy mark," Dante mutters in that deep voice of his. I tilt my head, gaining a new perspective. He thinks I asked for those girls to pick on me? I don't bother responding to that.

He drops his pencil and turns to face me. "Are you going to sit there and ignore me?"

"I'm listening to you," I assure him, looking down at my hands in my lap.

"Why won't you look at me when I talk to you, hell you don't look at anyone. You act like no one else exists." He sounds incredulous.

He thinks I'm being stuck up, that I'm being a bitch. I do look over at him now. I give him my entire attention.

I'm tired, tired of being the invisible girl, tired of working on getting mediocre grades, tired of going to school all day and working half the night. But mostly, I'm tired of worrying about my mom all by myself. Worrying when her next episode will come, worrying about coming home and finding her ready to move again, running from God knows what. I let him see all of it.

"I'm just trying to survive," I answer him too honestly.

His eyes soften, and his mouth opens, letting out a soft breath. "Survive what?" He tries for a whisper but still feel his deep tenor I bet he'd have a lovely singing voice.

"Everything," I mutter, looking away from him. It's too much. I can't give this total stranger a piece of me; it's probably his fault to begin with. He's the one that told cheer girl I asked him for help, and I know she's the ringleader

of my new visibility. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't even be a blip on her radar.

He doesn't try to speak to me for the rest of class, and I'm grateful.

Mr. Adams gives me a few more pages, which will help me with the nose and mouth, before class is over. I take those and my trance paper home even though the girls basically called me retarded because I needed it.

Work is a little busier tonight. Most of the booths are full and I sigh, knowing I can actually be useful.

Maggie stays behind the long counter helping all the customers sitting there, while I take the tables and booths.

"On Thursdays things pick up," Maggie explains while I'm wiping down an empty booth. "We usually stay busy through Sunday brunch." She shrugs her heavy shoulders like she doesn't have any further explanation. "Now that I know you know what you're doing, I think we should talk about a more permanent schedule."

I bounce on my toes, happy she's going to keep me on.

"All right, how does this look?" Maggie asks while pointing up to a large whiteboard over the desk in her office. She has me on Wednesday through Saturday from 3:30 till 9:00, and 8:00 until 1:00 on Sunday.

"Looks perfect!" I beam at her, relieved she's giving me all the hours.

"You're sure it's not too much? That you'll be able to keep up your school work?" She tips her head forward.

I dismiss her worries with a wave. "Positive."



THAT NIGHT WHEN I GET HOME, MOM IS AWAKE. SHE'S SCRUBBING THE TINY kitchen counter with a green brillo pad. Her gray eyes are unfocused, darting around and looking at everything but me.

"Working?" she questions me needlessly.

"Yeah, just got off," I mumble tiredly, hanging my bag over the back of the dinette seat. "How are you?" It's a loaded question with her. She could give me a vague fine, or she could give me a full rendition of every event that took place today, no matter how small or insignificant.

"Okay, I guess." She shrugs her frail shoulders. "I think..." She trails off, staring down at her hands. "I think this is where we belong."

I try to keep the shock from my voice when I ask, “Really?” I'm not sure if I was successful, but she starts scrubbing again.

This isn't the first time she's muttered those words about a new place but it's been years since she has.

I don't know if I can believe her or not, but that's not the only problem. Is Canton the place I want her to pick?

After all these years of running and never settling down, is this the place I want that to happen?

The question flits away immediately, because the answer is yes. If this podunk town is where she can finally relax and breathe, it's where we'll stay.

Even if the kids at school are jerks, I only have less than left anyway. Maybe we could even get a small apartment.

My mind spins with all the possibilities as I let the idea take hold.

I hear mom cleaning late into the night, when I finally drift off to sleep, lulled by the sounds of her scrubbing.

I wake up once thinking a dream must have pulled me from sleep, but as I turn over I swear I hear my mom's hushed voice speaking urgently. I can't make out what she's saying. I can tell she's trying to be quiet and her words are clipped.

Desperately hoping this isn't a new symptom to her ever-spiraling moods, I strain to make out what she is saying but it's impossible.

Still curious, I let my legs swing over the side of the flimsy mattress and settle my weight on the floor. After only two steps the floor makes a low groan and her words die immediately.

I stand frozen for a few moments. Hoping she'll continue so I can at least get an idea of what is sending her into such a state, but she never utters another word. In fact, the place is so quiet I'm half wondering if I imagined it all to begin with.



THE WALK TO SCHOOL FEELS TEN TIMES LONGER TODAY. I'M STILL TIRED FROM last night. It took hours to fall back asleep, and when I did it seemed like only minutes before my alarm clock was waking me up again.

I round the same sparse oak tree I've been taking shelter under over the last few mornings and let my eyes roam over my classmates once again.

Things are pretty much the same as the last couple days, only now I'm starting to put faces with names I've picked up in classes.

I see Dante with the two other guys he was with the other day, and I'm pretty sure they're the same two guys from the diner. Their heads are close together and no one else approaches them. They seem deep in conversation when all of a sudden Dante's head snaps around and he glares right at me.

I slip behind the tree trunk quickly, acting like I got caught doing something, but I probably just made it worse by hiding. Now it really looks like I was being all stalkerish. "Damn it!" I spin around, looking at the field that sits across from the school.

I give myself a few minutes before strolling out from the opposite side of the tree from where he caught me peeking. How the hell did he even know to look right at me? It was like he knew I was looking at him and exactly where I was.

I don't look up to see if they're still there, instead I keep heading straight for the front doors, blending in with all the other students.

In English class I feel a quick tap on my shoulder. I turn my head just enough so whoever it is knows I'm acknowledging them.

"Laura."

"Hmm," is my tiny reply.

"Hey, are you working at the diner tonight?" My brows furrow. I have a whole litany of questions running through my head. Who is this, how do they know I'm working, and where?

Without meaning to, my eyes connect with the blond guy behind me when I shift to see who's questioning me. His eyes are a soft green, almost translucent, as he stares right back at me.

My mouth opens to answer and his head tips at exactly the same time. "Damn," he whispers, his eyes rounded in surprise and I quickly glance away.

"Yes," I answer when I'm fully facing forward. For the rest of the class I try to ignore that he's right behind me, and before today I had no clue. I never noticed.

It's almost easy when I remember how paranoid I was moments before, when I was worried over his question. I cannot turn into my mother.

The rest of the day progresses easily and my lunch routine has fallen into place nicely. Other than the first day when I ran into Dante and Delaney—that's cheer girl—I haven't seen anyone use this stairwell.

Though I have been trying really hard to stay away from her group. After the little shove yesterday she hasn't tried anything else, yet.

As I'm balling up my paper sack I hear what sounds like the tail end of someone speaking, "...seen her here before. What do you think she meant?"

"Who knows, but have you seen her eyes?"

"Do you think see knows?" asks a third voice.

Just as I move to stand, three guys round the landing. All of them stop dead when they see me. I'm frozen too. My book is still lying open on the step I just vacated and my bag is one step below, on the same riser I'm standing on now.

I'm trapped with the knowledge that they were talking about me, looking for me. Dante is the first to break the surprised spell we all seemed to be in. He shoves his hands in his front pockets and rounds down his shoulders. It does nothing to hide his bulk.

"Oh hey, Laura," he says like they just happened upon me by accident. It's enough to unlock my muscles. I lower my eyes and contemplate an escape. I do not understand why they would be searching for me unless... unless they want to warn me off the diner. There certainly can't be any other reason.

Flashes of my mother telling me not to trust anyone scrolls through my mind, her warnings of how dangerous people can be, especially men. And these guys standing in front of me seem like they fit into that category more than your average teenage boy.

Looking at their shirts, I notice when the one on my left nudges Dante with his shoulder.

"This is Milo and Oliver. They said you're working at Maggie's?"

Great here it is. "I need that job," I mutter hastily.

It's quiet for about two seconds. The blond, Oliver, steps in front of Dante. "Maggie said you've been a big help, thanks."

My eyes jump to his face. He looks sincere. His soft green eyes are looking down at my hands and realize I'd been running my four fingers over my thumb in a nervous gesture.

"Really? You're not trying to get me to quit, or take my hours?" I ask, almost confused.

His head jerks back. "No. Why would you even think that?"

The bell rings before I have time to answer, not that I'd know how to answer that question anyway.

I scramble to collect my things when I sense someone move close behind me. “Here I can...” The voice trails off while I clutch my bag to my chest, backing away. I'm on the second floor now looking down at all three of them still gathered on the landing. The other one, Milo, opens his mouth like he might say something and I spin on my heel and flee. Even though my next class is on the first floor and I could use that stairway, I rush over to the main corridor, my mind pulsing with ideas of what they could have wanted from me.

FIVE

Nervous tension has me looking over my shoulder every time I'm in between classes and walking through the halls. It only gets worse when I get near my last hour, art, the only class I share with Dante.

I busy myself by grabbing my project from the back and making sure my pencil lead is sharp. I've already gathered my example sheets from my backpack so in theory I'm ready, but instead of getting started I'm too busy waiting.

I know the second he walks in the door, and not because I was looking. I know because I hear Delaney, announcing their arrival. "Bye Dante! I'll see you after class." He grunts a non-verbal reply.

"Hey," he acknowledges me while dropping a well-worn notebook on our shared tabletop.

"Hi," I squeak, sounding like a mouse. I'm on edge, I don't understand why he and the other two boys were looking for me.

Dante clears his throat and twists in his stool, angling in my direction. But before he can say anything Mr. Adams claps his hands together, calling everyone's attention to the front of the room.

"With only one week left before your portraits are due, I want to spend a few minutes with each of you to make sure everyone is headed in the right direction. As you all know, three of the top portraits will be selected for the county exhibit." He slants his head forward and peers at the class from under his brow. "There are several scholarship opportunities available to those selected." Mr. Adams glances at Dante as he finishes.

Dante makes a fist on the table, his fingers clenched so tightly his

knuckles go white from the pressure. His head is dropped low, not looking toward Mr. Adams at all. There's definitely something bothering him about what Mr. Adams is saying. Maybe he really wants or even needs that scholarship.

I take a quick second to examine his clothes. My first impression tells me he's not hurting for cash, but that really doesn't mean much. Maybe he's on his own for college. While my eyes pass over his snug black t-shirt, then trail down to his forearm, I notice his skin is darker than mine. Not tan, but more of an olive complexion. He has some thicker veins roping up from his inner elbow and a light dusting of dark hair smattered down to a chunky black leather cuff, which encircles his left wrist. His fingers slowly peel open and he stretches his hand a few times, releasing the pressure from how tightly he was gripping them. His wrist turns and peeking out from under the leather cuff I see a faint black line, like the beginning of a tattoo.

Does he have a tattoo under there? And if he does why would he cover it up? I speed through a few possibilities, ending on one of the few that makes any sense to me. Maybe he had an old girlfriend's name tattooed there. Why else would someone go through the pain of a tattoo then cover it up?

Without thought, I peer up at him and see him staring right back at me. I blink quickly a few times. I can't believe I got caught staring at him, again. He must think I'm a total creeper.

"You have a tattoo?" The question pops out of my mouth without my brains permission.

Dante's eyes widen and his brows shoot up. "How did you...?" The question trails off and he shifts, rolling his shoulders like someone just ran a hand over his back in a caress, and he's a big cat rising to meet the touch. His eyes even become heavily lidded. A soft sound comes next, like a content rumble while stretching just after waking up.

I snap my head forward. Not exactly sure what I'm witnessing, it seems like a relatively intimate moment, but who the hell is he sharing it with? Maybe he's crazy, maybe everyone is crazy, just their own brand of crazy. But I have no experience with this kind of crazy.

Is it getting hot in here?

My eyes must be as big as saucers when I finally look back up at Mr. Adams. I've missed half of what he's said, partly because I was staring at Dante, and partly because I still can't concentrate even though I've looked away.

As soon as Mr. Adams tells everyone to get started, Dante jumps from his seat and stalks over to the teacher. Seconds later he's rushing out the door without looking back.

I've been watching the clock and the door for Dante's return, so I know it's been exactly twenty-four minutes when he returns to class. He makes a stop at Mr. Adams's desk, waiting for the conversation between him and a girl to stop. He raps his knuckles on the wooden surface quickly and they both turn to him. He speaks for a moment then returns to our shared table, while Mr. Adams and the girl stare at his back as he walks toward me.

The teacher's eyes catch mine briefly before he gives a tiny shake of his head, seemingly bewildered, and then he looks again to the young lady at his side.

As soon as Dante sits down, he turns and looks at me, but I ignore it and pretend I'm engrossed in my work. "Laura?" he says hesitantly, seeming unsure.

"Hmm," I mumble back.

"Did someone tell you... we're coming to the diner tonight?" I'm almost positive that wasn't what he was going to say, that he changed it at the last second.

"Um, no." I shake my head in denial, confused why he'd asked me that and again a little worried they'll somehow jeopardized my job at Maggie's place.

"Well, me and the guys will be there. We usually come in a few nights a week."

I finally look over at him. He seems stiff, maybe even a little uncomfortable. "Okay," I drag out the word. "Did you not want me to be there? Cause I'm on shift tonight."

Dante lifts his hand and runs it down his face, tugging on his chin a bit. He huffs out a heavy breath. "I already knew you'd be there, we asked Maggie."

"And you don't want me to quit?" I question, keeping my eyes below his chin.

"No." Now it's his turn to seem confused. "We're all happy that Maggie actually hired you. A few nights a week one of us usually ended up helping, not that we minded but we can't always be there when she needs someone."

I can't help the small smile that tugs at my mouth. I'm so relieved I won't need to find another job. I bite the corner of my lip, then refocus on the

portrait in front of me which actually looks like it's coming together.

“Laura,” the teacher calls as the girl he was speaking with passes our station.

With little thought, I grab for my paper and I end up pushing it across the worktop right toward Dante. His hand reaches out lightning fast and slaps over the paper before it can slide right past him and onto the floor. “Whoa,” I breathe out. He moved so damn fast I barely reacted.

He looks up at me then slowly slides the paper back over. “Got it,” he replies in a hushed tone.

I reflexively take the paper from his outstretched hand.

I shake off all the questions collecting at the tip of my tongue and make my way to Mr. Adams’s desk to discuss my project.

As we're finishing up Mr. Adams asks, “Would you mind letting Dante know he's up next?”

I give a quick nod of affirmation while gathering my things.

“Dante?” His head jerks up from his work when I all but whisper his name.

“Yeah?”

“Mr. Adams is ready for you.” His eyes dart from me to the front of the room. He doesn't get up like I expect. Instead, he looks at the clock.

“There's something else I wanted to talk to you about, will you wait for me if the bell rings?”

Talk to me? What more could he have to say? He must see the indecision on my face because he rushes out, “It's about what happened in the hallway yesterday.”

Now I get it. Delaney will be here when class gets over, she said so herself when she called goodbye before art started. I wonder what he expects from me. Is he trying to get me in trouble with her? He doesn't seem like the sort who would try to stir up trouble, but what do I know?

“I can't, I have to get to the diner.” The excuse falls from my lips almost immediately.

“Dante,” Mr. Adams calls, pulling my attention my hands where I've settled my gaze. Dante huffs out a heavy breath and his stool screeches back when he stands.

My shoulders round down, he seems pretty put out.

I can't focus enough to work the last several minutes of class. I've looked at the clock more in the last few minutes than I usually do all hour. When I've

managed to peek at the front of the room, Dante appears to watch me.

I know at any minute the bell will ring and Delaney will be outside the classroom. I don't want to give her the chance to catch me. As my mind processes my encounters with her over the last few days, I realize Dante and his friends said they spend a bit of time at the diner. If he's coming, will she show up too? Now I have a whole other set of worries regarding work.

The bell rings and it startles me enough that I jump.

I already put my project away so I'm free to go, in my haste to get out the door I stumble and throw my arms out to catch myself before face-planting into the table next to mine.

Before my palms hit the surface, I feel a jerking motion around my waist and that strange static electricity dances down my spine. I'm pulled back further and my back hits someone's chest, and I know that person could only be Dante. "Whoa there," he murmurs in a low voice. I feel the words leave his chest and rumble against my back, because he's holding me that tightly. Strangely, I'm frozen. My arms are still outstretched. I feel a velvet caress on my hip, something I can't explain because the soft brush of what feels like fur is stroking my bare skin.

In the blink of an eye I'm pushed away from the warm embrace, feeling strangely bereft and off kilter.

Dante comes from behind, maintaining a decent distance. He crouches so we're eye level and I can't avoid his amber gaze. His eyes are wide. I think he's just as freaked out as I am. "You okay?" he barely whispers.

I go to reply when I see Delaney brush up to his side, molding herself to him.

"Just clumsy," comes my response while my eyes plunge to the floor.

"Dante, you ready?" Delaney grates out, her voice tight.

I'm going to pay for this, I almost wish he had let me fall onto the table. That would have been over quickly, but with Delaney, I can tell she is just getting started.

"I need to get to work," I explain while dodging around the still entwined couple. Dante turns as I walk past him, as he seemingly ignores the girl attached to his side.

I shoot one last look over my shoulder before I turn out of the classroom. He hasn't moved an inch. Did he feel that weird static too, the caress?

I have to force myself to think about anything other than Dante and the fact he told me he'd be at the diner tonight. As I head to the diner, I try to

distract myself but my thoughts are still on Dante when I get to work.



WE'VE BEEN SWAMPED ALL NIGHT. IT SEEMS EVERYONE AND THEIR SISTER comes to the diner on Friday nights, in a town this small I guess there isn't much else to do. There's been no sign of Dante or his friends, so maybe he changed his mind about coming, or maybe he's with Delaney. That thought shoots an unreasonable amount of jealousy through my veins. I barely know him, have only spoken to him a few times, and I'm jealous that he's probably with his girlfriend? Ridiculous.

“Maggie, I'm going to run to the ladies before heading home,” I call out. She's still in the kitchen so I barely hear her muffled reply.

After washing up I pull the wad money, mostly comprised of ones, from my apron pocket. The tips are pretty good for a small town. At this rate it won't be too long before we could actually get a small apartment. I put my cash away and rewash my hands before walking out to the diner. I'd already cleaned the bathrooms, so unless Maggie needs anything else I'm set to go.

“You sure you don't want to call someone for a ride, or stick around for another half hour till I'm done here? I don't mind dropping you off.” She frowns, tapping her pencil against the desk.

“I'm fine Maggie, it's only a ten-minute walk. I'll see you tomorrow.” I make eye contact, showing my sincerity, then give her a small wave before heading out to the parking lot.

On the walk home I don't see one car the entire time, which is what I expect for this lonely stretch of road.

Climbing up the two stairs to our door, I already have my keys out and ready. I glance at the bathhouse, wishing we had a normal bathroom in our camper, before deciding my shower can wait until morning. I can't count how many times I've showered at night and the lights have gone off because the motion sensors weren't triggered or they were on a timer.

Mom's asleep again when I lock the door behind me. Maybe this place is right for us; she's never been able to sleep like this for such extended periods. Usually she can sleep for a day or two after one of her episodes, but she seems to be sleeping well this whole week.

I pull my tips from the little bag I keep tucked in my bra, and hide most

of it in an old box of fish sticks in the freezer. The rest goes with me into the bedroom and gets rolled with some others inside one of my mismatched socks. The stash in the freezer is for RV expenses and food, and this is what I use when I'm in desperate need of clothes or for any other emergencies that pop up. I've got a small nest egg squirreled away, which if you ask me is pretty impressive seeing I'm the only one who's worked the past few years.

I strip out of my jeans noting I'll need to do a few loads of laundry in the morning before work, since those were my last pair of clean pants. Crawling into bed I let the events of today roll over me. I make a conscious effort not to think of Dante or the warm fuzzy feeling I had when he caught me.

SIX

Saturday morning passed in a flash between laundry, the small amount of homework I had, and a trip to the local grocery store. I had just enough time to throw my long hair in a loose braid before running out the door for work. I rarely bother doing anything but a halfhearted ponytail, but my hair is still wet and I'm not going to leave it hanging while I'm working so it can dry properly.

Maggie waves me in as soon as my foot hits the floor. "Laura, goodness I think I've already gotten used to you being here to help. We've had a steady stream all day. Can you run and check the bathrooms and then make sure all the booths are taken care of?" Maggie asks hastily, while filling a coffee with one hand and handing someone else a slice of lemon meringue pie with the other.

"Sure, be right back." Thankfully the men's room is empty when I knock on the door, and after grabbing a few balled up paper towels from the floor and a wiping down the sinks, everything looks in order. The ladies' room needs much of the same.

After a quick wash up, I tie on my apron, grab a half-used order pad, and get busy.

There's a short lull right before the dinner rush starts at five o'clock. It's during that time that Oliver, the guy with long blond hair, comes in. As soon as I see him my heart thuds with a heavy beat. He's utterly gorgeous but I don't think that's what has my heart racing. No, I'm pretty sure it has something to do with the guy who said he would come here with Oliver and Milo yesterday and never showed.

I forget I'm supposed to go unnoticed, that I should stay far away from

this boy and his friends. I meet his clear green eyes and he smiles, he hooks his thumb in his front pocket and shifts his shoulder, angling closer to me. I'm not sure I would remember my own name if someone asked me.

“Hi Laura, you guys been busy?” He's got a really nice voice, a smooth baritone, nothing nearly as deep as Dante's but still very soothing.

“I just got in at three, but it's been pretty busy.”

Oliver rubs his hands together like he's anticipating something. “Alright, where do ya need me?”

I'm sure my face shows the confusion I'm feeling. Is he asking where to sit? People usually seat themselves. My eyes dart over his shoulder looking for Maggie.

I feel a quick brush along my upper arm, the static I've come to expect from Dante's touch jolts me, forcing me to gaze up at Oliver who's moved much closer.

He's staring right back at me, his eyes wide and his pupils blown huge, almost covering his clear green irises.

“Ollie,”

Maggie booms, ripping through the moment. We both startle, I even jump back like I was too close to something that was going to get me in trouble. I think I might just have been.

“Glad you could still make it sweetheart. Laura's been doing fine, but I won't turn down the extra help.”

The purpose of his question finally clicks into place, he's working, and he was asking which section he'd be on.

I'm so clueless, what else could this beautiful boy have meant? A nervous giggle almost escapes when I realize how silly I'm being.

Recovering quickly Oliver, or Ollie as Maggie calls him, gives her a megawatt smile before walking over to the counter, where he winks at me.

Now I'm really flustered.

The rest of the night I try to keep my distance, but it seems impossible when we're working together. Every second he's not taking orders or filling drinks, he's right behind me helping with my tables. I don't imagine he's insinuating I'm not capable, in fact he's told me how great I'm doing more than once. After working with him the past few hours, he seems like the sort who has a problem sitting still, he's constantly moving.

By the end of the night I'm pretty beat. Oliver kept me on my proverbial social toes all evening. Throwing random questions at me left and right, I also

spent way too much time checking the door every time the bell jingled to see if Dante would show up.

“Well, that's it for me Maggie,” I tell her after finishing mopping the bathrooms. She looks up from behind the counter with a small smile.

“Sounds good Hun.” Oliver comes out from behind the swinging doors that lead to the kitchen. I wasn't sure if he was still here, since I'd been cleaning the bathrooms for a while.

“Perfect timing Ollie, you can give Laura a ride home. I hate that she walks so late at night.”

His eyes jerk over to mine accusingly. “You walk? Why doesn't someone pick you up?”

I'm already dismissing the idea while he's speaking. There's no way I want him knowing I live in an old broken down mobile home.

“That's really okay, I don't mind walking, it's good exercise.” I ignore his question altogether. Oliver snorts and wraps Maggie in a hug, which manages to make the robust woman seem small. She pats his back in an affectionate manner.

“You see Laura home safe Ollie. I'll see you and the boys tomorrow.” Now it's my turn to be ignored.

“Come on little Gray.”

“Huh?” I ask in confusion, while Oliver grabs my arm and tows me out the door. That same electric fuzziness is tingling up and down my arm, distracting me from his soft manhandling as he guides me into his car, and wondering why he called me Gray.

With another brush down my arm, I find myself sitting in the front seat of an older muscle car as Oliver closes the door behind me.

He jumps in the driver seat and cranks the engine, which purrs to life with a throaty growl. I can feel the motor. My hands immediately widen, one reaching for the door, the other for the center console.

Oliver looks over at me when I do. He grabs my hand and rolls his eyes. “This is Dante's car.” He shakes his head like he's exasperated and his statement should explain everything.

He doesn't let go of my hand for a few seconds, but when he does, he places it on my lap with a small pat.

“Where to?” he asks, while backing out using the mirrors.

Now remembering he's driving me home, I suffer a moment of panic. I don't even care that he's going to see where I live at this point. I have bigger

problems. I need to avoid my mother seeing I'm getting a ride home at all costs. I don't even know the kind of reaction that would prompt from her.

“Um, just down that road a bit, then turn left.” Once we're out of the parking lot I try to get him to drop me off. “This is fine. I can walk from here.” His head whips to the side, scrutinizing me.

“We've gone like ten feet. And there are no houses here, I think I'd know.” Under his breath he adds, “we've been waiting here long enough.”

Again, he confuses me. I can't address that now though. I have other more important things to deal with. “Listen, it's just up the road a little bit, but I need you to promise you'll drop me off at the entrance.” I glance over at him, imploring him with my eyes. “My mom can't know I got a ride. I'd be in a lot of trouble.”

Olive hits the brakes hard. Thankfully I'm latched in with the lap belt or I would have just bounced off the dashboard. My hands fly out and smack it anyway. His arm shoots out and braces me, holding me back in the seat more effectively than any shoulder belt could.

“Oh holy shit! I'm so sorry, are you okay?”

I nod, still conscious of his arm across my chest, right above my breasts.

“What was that, a deer or something?” I didn't see anything, but I was looking at him, not the road. His arm falls away slowly, and he grabs the steering wheel tight enough that I hear it creak.

“Something,” he mutters still at a dead stop.

Lifting his foot off the brake he slowly drives again. “Are you sure you're okay, nothing hurts?”

“I'm fine but you need to keep your eyes on the road.” I motion to the windshield.

“Sorry,” he mumbles again. “What kind of trouble would you be in? Like you'd get grounded or something?” He gives me the side eye, still watching the road like I asked.

“No, not grounded,” I hedge.

“Well then what?”

I sigh. “It's nothing like you're probably assuming. More like it would *cause* trouble rather than I'd actually get *in* trouble.”

Oliver looks over at me again, his eyes narrowed. I wave my hand forward. “Nothing to see here.”

“Ha,” he belts out, although it's not really a laugh but more of an exclamation.

“Why would it cause trouble?” he asks after a few seconds, shifting in his seat.

“Will you promise to drop me at the entrance?”

“Are you bargaining with me, like if I promise to drop you where you want you'll tell me?” He sounds slightly outraged. I cross my arms over my chest defiantly.

“I didn't ask you to drive me, but yes, if you promise I'll tell you all about my private life just so it will abate your curiosity.” It comes out a little snider than I'd meant it to, but I think I got my point across.

Oliver sighs and his shoulders fall. “All right, I promise.” His tone is flat. When I don't speak right away, he looks over at me.

“Right here is fine.” I gesture to the old wooden sign leading to a gravel path. His eyes squint and he tries to read in the darkness. “Turtle Resort?” he whispers. The horror I see on his face reaffirms why I don't let anyone close. No one else understands my mom. Hell, most days I don't either, but I still feel oddly defensive about my life. We're making due, doing the best we can for now.

Indignant anger spikes and I don't want to give him any explanation now. I have to though; I have a feeling if I don't keep my word, neither will he.

“My mom's sick, okay? This car is loud and it would draw too much attention, maybe even wake her up if she's asleep. It would worry her if she found out I was riding with a *stranger*.” I say the last few words like an accusation. As soon as I'm done speaking, I click the seatbelt off and I'm out the door the next second.

I hear him curse once before the door slams shut. The engine revs and I assume he's taking off as I run down the gravel drive, past the front pond, and toward the back of the campground.

I'm strangely numb when I untangle my keys from the change in the bottom of my bag. I was so mortified, filled with a hot seed of anger a few moments ago, and now it feels weird being away from him.

I think I was hoping, without even realizing it, that things could be different now. That I could somehow become more of a real person instead of the shell I feel like now.

The reality is that nothing has changed. My mom may decide we need to move tomorrow, and she may spiral into an episode when I open this door. I don't think she'll ever be able to accept not all people are out to get us, that it might be okay to be known by someone.

The whole RV is dark when I get inside. My throat tightens before I even understand the implications. I've never walked into a dark house, no matter how late I've gotten in from work. Instinctually, I know something's wrong.

“Mom.” My voice is little more than a croak, but the urgency can't be denied.

I'm met with silence. I drop my bag on the floor and rush to the light. I'm not sure what I think I'll find when the room illuminates, but I feel an overwhelming sense of relief when everything looks exactly like it did when I left this afternoon.

“Mom, where are you?” I call out as I make my way to the back of the RV, still filled with nervous tension. I know she doesn't leave the RV anymore, hell, even when I go to the grocery store she pulls the curtains that cordons off the living space from the driver's seat and waits for me to get back.

The bed is unmade, but that's how I left it, so it isn't surprising. What scares the ever-loving shit out of me is that her small pile of clothes, which I just separated out of the clean laundry, are gone. One look in the overhead cupboard and I realize so is the small overnight bag we've had for years. The one we'd use when mom was still working and we had enough money to splurge on a hotel room occasionally. She'd always make sure it was one with an indoor pool, so we could swim in the evening when most of the other people were already back in their rooms.

I run to the tiny bathroom I barely ever use, preferring the bathhouses to the half shower and plastic toilet, and find one of the few possessions my mother holds dear gone too. The white plastic box, which is supposed to look like marble, is still here, but the ring I know was inside is gone.

She stopped wearing it years ago. I thought she might have sold it back when she had a tough time making due before I started working. But a few years ago I was under the sink looking for pads that weren't there, and I'd found this box attached to the underside of the sink.

I'm pretty sure my dad gave it to her; she always wore it on the ring finger of her left hand. I picture the unusual stone and the pretty pinkish metal the surrounded it in my mind and wonder how long it's been gone, or if she really left and she took it with her. Bewildered, I get ready for bed, hoping she will be back when I wake up.

The next morning I'm completely lost. I haven't slept all night and now it's time to work. I'm torn, I almost want to stay here and wait, just in case she

might come back, but I can't lose this job and I think that's exactly what would happen if I didn't show up. I haven't even been working there a full week yet. Not to mention I have bills that need paying, and seeing that the freezer cash is gone along with my mom, I make the decision. I'd better get to work.

SEVEN

Maggie knows there's something wrong. I can tell by the sidelong glance she keeps throwing my way, at least I hope that's all it is. I close my eyes and take two long breaths, telling myself to pull it together. I have two hours left of my shift and I can fall apart when I get home.

I've been working in a daze. I can't remember half of the faces I've served this morning. I'm barely functioning on autopilot.

I have absolutely no idea where my mom could have gone, no clue where to look. What's even worse? I can't figure out why she would have left.

I feel a warm palm land on my shoulder and jump. Turning, I see Maggie's kind eyes searching my face. "You okay Laura?"

"Yes, of course," I answer automatically and begin scanning the diner. I wonder how long I've been zoned out this time. I see a couple empty glasses at one of my tables, so I give Maggie a weak smile over my shoulder and rush over for the reprieve.

WHEN MY SHIFT IS DONE, I'VE HAD A COMPLETE ABOUT-FACE. I'M NOW terrified to leave because I'm pretty sure I'll be returning to an empty RV.

As I'm pushing out of the door, it gets pulled from the outside, and I nearly fall when the weight I was pushing against disappears.

"Sorry, excuse me," I mutter robotically as two hands, hands which give me an electric jolt, grab my upper arms. I look up and meet a stunning pair of amber colored eyes. Dante.

He still hasn't let go of me and I have an overwhelming need to bury my head in his chest. Not only that, but I want to tell him my mom is gone. That she left me alone and I have no idea what to do.

Without my consent my foot slides forward, bringing us closer, and his eyes widen a fraction. It's enough to remind me I don't know him, and he certainly doesn't know me. When I pull away, I immediately feel the loss of his touch. Not only the physical touch but also the heady tingling it brings with it. His mouth opens and his head tilts. "Laura?"

He doesn't have to say anything else; I know he's asking me about five questions with the utterance of my name.

"Sorry. I wasn't paying attention," I reply with yet another apology. I sidestep him, allowing him to move out of the entry. He only takes two steps then moves so he's facing me again. As I start to walk through the door, I hear him say, "The guys are meeting me here. Wanna grab a bite with us?" I spin back around to look at him, wondering if he's just throwing me a bone to be nice, or if he feels the strangeness between us and is just as curious about it as I am.

His wide shoulders are rounded down, and his hands are shoved deep in the front pockets of his dark jeans. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was almost nervous, but right now in this moment, a moment that has me questioning just about everything. I don't care that I can't have friends. I don't care that he's probably just feeling sorry for me, because I need this distraction. I need just a few more minutes before I try to figure out what's happening in my life and what I could have possibly done to make my mom leave.

"Yes," I respond quickly before I change my mind. Again his eyes widen and he looks at me like I might be about to launch myself at him, but a slow smile creeps over his face, his whole face, and let me tell you, it makes my knees a little weak.

"Really?" he says, almost in a whisper. A denial comes to my tongue quickly, thinking he was just offering to be nice. Damn it. "Great. I mean good, that's good. Uh, here okay?" He motions to the first booth.

Now I'm the one giving him the side eye, since he's acting nervous again. I slide into the booth with a little hop to get centered. He bends to sit on the opposite side but jerks right back up, taking a few steps and coming to my side. While he's doing this, the door jingles and the Milo and Oliver walk in.

All three of them freeze for all of two seconds. Then they continue over

to the table, both of them wearing easy smiles, and I'm instantly on edge.

Dante slowly slides his big body into the bench seat next to me. Once I realize what's happening I scoot over into the corner, feeling a bit trapped.

Oliver moves into the bench across from us, his eyes are bright when he smiles at me. Milo is quick to follow.

It's silent as my eyes dart everywhere but their faces. Eventually I let my gaze drop to my hands, puddled in my lap. Awkward tension has me tightening my shoulders and arms, and I begin shrinking myself into the corner.

“Sooo,” an unfamiliar voice sighs in an long exhale. I hear a thud under the table and quick gasp. At that exact moment Dante turns to face me in the booth.

“I'm not sure if you've met Milo yet,” Dante says as an introduction. I glance up just in time to see Milo mouth the word 'dick' to Dante, then his eyes find mine.

Milo's mouth opens like he's about to say something, but he freezes. His eyes are a dark navy blue; so dark in fact that I bet if I wasn't staring right back at him, I would have mistaken them for dark brown, almost black. Something familiar tugs at me as I watch transfixed, as his pupil shrinks the tiniest bit, allowing me to see how the intense blue ring around his eyes fades to a shockingly light blue. It's almost like he has two different colors in his eyes—the transition is that astonishing.

I glance away then, realizing that if I can see the fine details of his beautiful eyes, he can see the strange abnormality in mine.

“Holy shit,” the same unfamiliar voice mutters slowly.

Another thump is quickly followed by Dante's deep voice asking, “So how was your shift Laura?” I glance over at him, grateful someone is trying to break this floundering situation.

“Okay, I guess. We stayed pretty steady.” I shrug and rub my cheek against my shoulder. I can feel both the boys across the table assessing me. I feel like I have something on my face with the way they won't stop looking.

Nervous energy has me pulling and running my hands along the strap of my bag, which is crossed over my chest.

“Did you eat?” Oliver blurts out like he's been trying and failing to come up with something to say. I tilt my head, staring over at him from his outburst.

“Uh, no. I guess I haven't,” I recall, thinking I should have grabbed

something, but I just wasn't hungry, too worried about my mom to be concerned with eating.

He shoves Milo over a bit as he tries to escape the booth. "Let me go put an order in with Gran and Gus before he shuts down the grill."

Milo hastily stands up to let a rushing Oliver out from his inside seat, and we all watch as he passes through the kitchen doors.

"Hope you like burgers," Dante remarks as Milo slides back into his seat, "cause I'm sure that's what he's getting. The bigger and greasier, the better if you ask Ollie."

I'm not sure how to respond or if he even expects me to, so I just sit there wondering how I've managed to get myself in this situation.

"Football's about done, when's the last game again?" Dante asks Milo, who looks the slightest bit confused before he answers.

"Last game's the weekend before Halloween. Remember?"

"Yeah that's right." Dante nods. "What did coach want after the game Saturday?"

Milo is slow to respond and when he does, he sounds like he's talking to a young child. "He just wanted me to spend a few extra hours at the gym this week with coach Bills, but didn't we already talk about this?"

Dante tilts his heads toward me and widens his eyes. Before either of them can say anything else I quietly interrupt, "I should probably get going."

Both boys turn to me when I speak. Their attention is a little overwhelming.

"But..." Dante searches for something to say. "Ollie will be back any minute, and he probably already ordered you something," he finishes.

I feel heat in my cheeks and try with all my might to find an excuse why I'd need to leave right away. Dante looks over at Milo like he might add something, but he doesn't. Just as I'm about to open my mouth and insist I need to go, the kitchen doors swing open and out backs Oliver.

He's holding four blue tinted clear plastic cups with his fingers wrapped around them the way someone familiar with serving does. Oliver brings them to the table without spilling a drop of the liquid, which is dangerously close to the top. He sets them down and divides the cups between each of us as he looks over the table.

"Miss me?" he jokes to our quiet group. His eyes scan the three of us and his brow furrows. "I had to promise Gus we'd help him wax the floor next month, so he'd fire the grill back up." Oliver slides into the seat easily.

Milo snorts, “We always do.”

Oliver rolls his eyes but grins. “We know that, but he needed to hold something over our heads.”

With Oliver back at the table, he doesn’t let awkward silence fill the space between us. I’m not nearly as desperate to flee. Time passes so quickly before I know it, Maggie has a tray loaded with several meals headed to our table.

Once all the plates are down and Maggie has returned to the kitchen with a warning the kitchen is closed, I eye all the dishes before me. There are at least seven full meals packed on the table.

“Went with a little of everything,” Oliver explains to the once again quiet table.

That he did. There are chicken fingers, a huge plate of lasagna with a butter dipped breadstick, a few plates of burgers, and even what I’m pretty sure you’d call a sampler plate filled with tons of fried goodness.

My mouth waters at seeing it all and my stomach lets out an embarrassing growl.

My hand flies to cover my belly button, trying to somehow hold in the mortifying sound, but it’s a little too late. Dante lets loose a low chuckle and Oliver grins like what just happened was the cutest thing he’s ever heard.

“Why don’t you choose first?” Milo says when no one else reaches for anything. My eyes widen and I give a quick shake of my head in dismissal.

“Well,” Ollie starts, “I want a burger, we all know that.” He winks at me again when I look up at him as he grabs the biggest burger I’ve ever seen come out of the kitchen. The other two look around the table and they each glance at each other before shifting the plates around so they each have burgers in front of them. Milo’s is piled high with a fried egg and guacamole, while Dante’s has thick slices of crunchy bacon falling out the sides.

It seems that Oliver knew exactly what to order for the guys and I’m left with the thought that all this extra food is for me, or at least for me to pick from.

The gesture of kindness is more than I’ve ever been given, and it makes me feel guilty I was trying to leave earlier.

“Well, what will it be Laura? You better pick cause these guys have no problem eating all of it.”

Feeling slightly mollified that maybe this wasn’t all for just me, I reach for the plate that makes me lick my lips in anticipation.

The lasagna is piping hot with layers of gooey melted cheese and thick noodles. I'm in heaven after the first bite. The breadstick leaves my fingers full of greasy butter and salty goodness, making it hard not to lick the deliciousness right off my fingers, but I refrain.

The table is quiet again, but not the awkward silence it was before. Now it's just the lull that happens when hungry teenagers fall upon food, keeping us from acknowledging each other.

Half way through my meal, my bites slow. My tummy is getting pretty full considering I don't usually wait all day to eat, and then scarf down a huge dinner.

Trying to be sneaky, I peek up at the guys as they eat. Surprisingly Oliver's plate is almost empty, and he's reaching past Milo to get the cheese sticks on his plate. Without missing a beat or even looking up Milo grabs the fried cheese and hands it over before Oliver touches it.

It seems these boys have either been friends for a long time, or they're all really comfortable together. A thought sparks as I watch them move effortlessly around each other. Snagging food from each other's plate, leaning on one another to reach for something on the others' plates, or to grab the ketchup and salt.

Maybe they're together, together. Like romantically. My head tilts as I examine them in a new light. A slight pang rattles my chest, or is it stomach? I'm not sure which, but I don't think I like that thought for some reason.

I peek over at Dante quickly and notice he's staring at me in much the same way I am him. He couldn't know what I'm thinking, but I still feel a weird sense of guilt,

which doesn't even make sense.

I feel a hot wave of jealousy when I think about him with Delaney, and now I'm feeling something akin to that when I think about the two boys in front of me being an item?

I shake my head in refusal at the thought and dismiss it just as quickly. I'm probably feeling a bit of a crush for all of them because this is the only real attention I've ever received.

“What was that?” asks the voice I'm starting to associate with Milo. Snapping out of my head, I snap my gaze toward him then down at my food briskly.

“Did you say something?”

I look around again, wondering who he's talking to.

“Laura?” I jump when he says my name.

“Me? No,” I reply then clear my throat.

“Oh, thought I saw you shaking your head. I was wondering what I missed,” Milo continues while pulling something half eaten right out of Oliver hand then shoving it in his mouth before Oliver can protest. His mouth is still open, and he grunts and grabs an onion ring instead.

My suspicion confirmed about their relationship, I find a small smile tipping my lips, even with my crush they're impossibly cute with each other.

EIGHT

Maggie comes by once to check on us, but the guys dismiss her quickly, promising to clean up after themselves.

It's nearly five o'clock when Dante leans back in the seat with his hand draped over his stomach. "Oh god, I already regret that," he moans.

I don't know how they did it, but almost all the plates are empty. Between the three of them there's barely a crumb left. I now feel silly for ever thinking they ordered all that just so I could pick what I wanted, but I'm grateful for the distraction of their company. I've been way too consumed with them to obsess over where my mom is, or if she's coming back.

They talk easily with each other now that the strangeness of my presence seems to have worn off for them. Most of the time they carry on as if I'm not even here, not that they're ignoring me, more like they're so comfortable with each other they can't help the way they react to one another. I find myself engrossed in watching them, paying way too much attention to every movement Oliver and Milo make, since they're easier to watch seated across from me.

Dante's presence almost becomes bearable next to me. I'm relaxed enough that some tension in my shoulders has lessened. My elbow lifts to the table and I lean my cheek and temple on my palm.

They're talking about school and assignments, a paper none of them want to start is due, and I blink slowly. My belly is full and last night's sleeplessness seems to be catching up with me.

A warm tingle buzzes across my cheek. I sigh and lean into the felling. My head falls and I'm jolted awake right when my shoulder collides with

something hard and warm.

It barely takes a second before I realize where I am and who I'm with. Mortification is swift as it burns my cheeks and gives way to shame. Good god, what was I thinking? Was I drooling, how long was I asleep?

"Laura," Dante's deep voice croons, while I rub both hands over my face to hide the redness I know must be there.

"I'm so sorry," I mutter through my hands.

"Kill a guy's ego, would you?" I peek through my fingers at Oliver. "All three of us combined aren't entertaining enough to keep one beautiful girl awake with our thrilling conversation." He smiles at me through his impressively long eyelashes I'm secretly cursing him for. He's the jokester of the group, keeps everything lighthearted. I blush harder from the compliment.

"Didn't sleep well last night?" Milo asks with a small frown on his face.

"No, not really," I answer finally, sitting up. When the silence stretches, I give a shaky excuse about needing to get home.

Dante stands slowly and extends his hand down to tug me from the seat. The moment my hand is in his, I sense that same pooling warmth and a brush of something familiar against my senses.

Caught off guard I start to ask, "Do you feel that?" But before he can answer, the door opens with a jingle and we're interrupted. My hand is still in Dante's when Delaney walks up to the table. Her eyes are trained on the exact spot our skin is connected, and where the tingle is coming from. I jerk my hand free and rub my palm over the rough denim covering my thigh.

"Cozy, cozy, cozy," she hisses, eyes now narrowed in my direction.

One of the guys huffs or snorts as a reply.

"Thought you had plans with the guys today Dante?" Delaney accuses in a whiny tone.

"I did, do," growls Dante past a clenched jaw. Great, now I've gotten him in trouble.

Without me even noticing, I've somehow been shuffled to the back of the group.

"How did you guys end up here with her?" Her tone makes it clear what she thinks of me.

"Delaney," Dante barks, "I've told you I can't do weekends, so if you need to find someone else for the position then do it, but I need you to respect that or I'll walk!"

From behind Oliver's back, I see her lips soften and turn into a pout.

"I'm sorry Dante," she coos softly. "You know how I get. I just want the best and that's you." Her fingers crawl up his arm as she takes a step closer. I turn away before I witness anymore.

Desperation leaks from her in spades. I almost feel sorry for her, that she'd be willing to let him treat her this way. If I was in her shoes, would I do the same? No, I think with a small amount of conviction. I want to be wanted by someone. I never want to be the person who someone settles for.

Slowly, I take a few steps back. No one notices when I pass through the kitchen doors and escape out the service entrance.

The further I get from the diner, the more anxious I get. Between wanting to disappear from the Dante and Delaney situation and worrying about what I'll find when I get home, I'm at a near jog.

Unlocking the door I already know the truth. She's not here. She left me. With no explanation. Nothing.

Did I become akin to one of the places she needed to run from? More importantly, where did she go, and how will she survive?

I drop down onto the old sofa, collapsing on myself.

The heavy weight of tears stings my eyes, but the dampness stays pooled there. Thoughts of the past few weeks assault me—was there something wrong that I didn't know, and was she hiding something from me? Other than her sleeping way more than usual, I can't think of anything that seemed off... wait, there was the night I woke to hear her talking, possibly to someone. Who could it have been? I just figured she was talking to herself, maybe a new symptom of her psychosis. But perhaps not, maybe it was somebody, and that's who she's with. I never could make out anything she said, just the sound of harsh whispers and an undeniable urgency. Then an even worse thought comes—what if she didn't choose to leave, what if someone made her, or even took her?

The rumble of a car in the distance frightens me in a way I'm not familiar with. I'm alone now, so alone. Without the constant presence of my mom and the persistent need to take care of her, the sick game of 'what if' continues in my head.

I jump up and check the door to the RV. The only place I've ever really known as home, and the place that always felt somewhat safe, now feels like a tin can. The thin walls and flimsy door offer little to no protection if someone wanted in. I shake my head in denial and step back from the locked

door. I won't do this. I'm not going to let this fear incapacitated me. I need to find out what happened to my mom.



I TRIED TO SLEEP IN THE BED, BUT IT WAS NO USE. EVERYTHING seems unfamiliar and I couldn't bring myself to be that far away from the door. Our things surround me as I wiggle into the small sofa. I take comfort she hasn't disappeared completely. I drape her thin teal blanket over me as I close my eyes and try to pretend she's in the kitchen, scrubbing the tiny counter for the seventh time today. I feel strange and out of sorts. I've never been this needy girl. I've always been the one taking care of her, now I actually feel like the seventeen-year-old girl I am.

I spend a long time telling myself to settle down, stop thinking. My body and brain need the rest.

It isn't quick, but sleep does eventually come.

I wake several times during the night, awareness making me slightly panicked, but I'm so exhausted I fall back to sleep almost immediately. The alarm that's still in my room rouses me. I'm bone weary when I make my way toward the back of the motor home. School seems so unimportant right now, but I have no idea what else to do with myself, so I get busy getting my things together for a shower.

I keep my eyes open and searching on the walk to school, usually I keep my focus on the ground in front of me, but I keep thinking I'll get some clue as to where my mom is, catch site of her or something.

Unfortunately, I arrive at the school quickly and without any insight into my mother's disappearance. Everyone and everything are moving along without a hint that my tiny world just might be imploding.

All the cliques are gathered much like last week and it's when my eyes land on Delaney that I remember what happened last night.

I was too concerned with my mom issues to think about what my little distraction with the guys might cost me at school since she caught me with them.

A groan I can't control works its way up my tight throat. Neither she nor the girls gathered around her have glanced my way yet. I wonder if she told them I was at the diner last night, or maybe I'll get lucky and she'll keep that

little tidbit to herself, not wanting to admit her boyfriend blew her off.

Speaking of which, I spot Oliver's long light hair moving through the crowd. Milo and Dante are right on his heels. They stop as soon as they reach the sidewalk that leads to the parking lot and scan the tree line. If I didn't know better, I'd say they were looking for someone—looking for me? As soon as the thought pops into my head, Oliver's hand shoots up in the air and he points directly at me. I turn, making sure there's no one behind me, but I already know there isn't. With a nod of his head he motions for me to come forward.

He's gained some attention with his exaggerated movements and now I feel like half the school is watching us. With sluggish feet and my eyes on my shoes, I make my way over to him while he continues walking toward me.

“Hey Laura, you disappeared on us last night.” Thankfully we're far enough from the other kids that I don't think they can hear his words.

“I just needed to get home,” comes my lame excuse.

“Everything all right Laura?” I look over when I hear Milo's question. He actually sounds genuinely concerned, which is unfamiliar.

All three guys are huddled close by and their presence is overwhelming to say the least. I cast my gaze over to where I last saw Delaney standing, and I'm not surprised when I find her staring daggers back at me.

“Laura?” It's Dante this time. Why are they talking to me, why are they acting like they know me, or care?

“Yeah,” I croak back then clear my throat. I forget sometimes how little I speak.

“Maggie was pretty upset you left without telling her, that you walked when she made us promise to give you a ride.”

I wince, well now I know why they are talking to me. They probably want to give me an earful, just like the one they probably got from Maggie.

“Sorry if I got you guys in trouble. I'm used to taking care of myself. Let Maggie know it was my fault, I won't let her blame you.” Oliver wrinkles his eyes and nose a bit. His face is so very expressive. If I had to guess, I'd say he's confused.

No one speaks for a few seconds, but we're all standing there in the silence. I feel all of them looking at me. I tug my backpack up on my shoulder higher and shuffle my feet.

“I'm glad you made it home safe,” Dante adds, finally breaking the

silence with his deep voice. When I don't respond Milo tugs the broken strap of my backpack.

“We should probably head in, the bell's about to ring.” His words register and I start forward heading past them and the rest of the students still milling around.

I make it to my first class and find my seat, my heart beating fast. I'm not used to all the attention from the boys, and what they bring with them.

The next few hours pass with me alternating between worrying about my mom and trying to forget she might be gone for good. Delaney and the guys are circulating in the back of my thoughts. I'm not sure I can handle all the problems their acknowledgement might bring.

I move through the halls quickly, keeping my head down but my senses alert for any sign of trouble. I make it to my locker with no hassle when I realize I forgot to make myself a lunch this morning. Great.

Sitting on the top step, I scour my bag for a snack to hold me over until I can get home. I'm just peeling back the wrapper on a somewhat smashed granola bar when I hear them coming up the steps.

Dante turns the corner on the landing and stops when he sees me. Oliver, who's still hopping up the stairs behind him, crashes into his back. Dante barley jolts, only taking one shuffle of a step before planting his feet back on the landing. If that would have been me, I'd have gone flying Boy's got some balance.

Oliver continues around his friend like nothing happened and plops himself right next to me. “Hey, what's up?”

Taken back by his familiarity, I look at him for a long second.

“Nothing, I guess. What's up with you?” I finally respond, and he cracks an easy grin.

“Oh, just wondering why this beautiful girl I know ignores me in class and always sits in this stairwell for lunch. Got any ideas?” A blush stains my cheeks. That's the second time he's called me beautiful, and it isn't something I could easily forget. I've dropped some of my barriers with Ollie, he's just so sweet, and now that I know he and Milo are together it seems easier to be around him, harder in some respects too.

Our eyes connect, and I feel a tugging sensation in my stomach, almost like a pull, down low. My hand flies to my lower abdomen as a pooling warmth gathers there. Oliver sucks in a deep breath and his eyes widen a fraction.

I break the connection, looking away and noting the way Milo and Dante are watching us with rapt attention.

I dismiss the strange feeling in my body for attraction, which I'm unfamiliar with, and take a bite of my granola bar just to give myself something to do.

Dante takes a step forward and spins like he might try to squeeze into the space between me and the wall. I scoot over instinctively, and my hip and thigh meet Ollie's. Dante slides down and we're all three smashed together on the step. This is the closest I've ever been to someone, let alone two someones. The warmth in my abdomen doubles and the tingle I've come to expect from touching them is zinging across my thighs.

What is it about these boys that makes my body go haywire? I've never really gotten close to anyone, but there have been times in my life where I've bumped into people or been touched by someone while passing through crowded area, but I've felt nothing close to this.

Dropping the granola bar to my lap, I run my palms over my denim-covered thighs, contemplating how to ask if it's normal and if they feel it too. Milo sits down on the step below us, wedging his back against Ollie's legs and turning his face up to us. I swallow thickly and shift my knees closer to Dante to allow Milo more room.

"No, that's okay," he mutters and grabs my ankles by wrapping his arm around them and pulling me back even closer to him.

The moment he touches me a low hum fills my body. It's like a circuit has been fully connected. My body comes alive with sensation.

I know my eyes must be huge as I look at the three of them with questions.

"Is that... what's happening?" I don't know what to say, but I have to say something. Do they feel this? Is it normal?

Milo's eyelids are heavy as his head drops back onto Ollie's knee, his arms still wrapped around my legs. He looks like he's about to fall asleep and I feel like I'm touching a live wire.

Dante's low gravelly voice comes from right next to my ear, "What we've been waiting for."

NINE

Beyond confused I start to panic. My breathing becomes labored and my heart rate skyrockets. What does he mean I'm what they've been waiting for? I jump up and step over Milo, severing the connection. Backing away from them feels wrong, but I don't know how else to handle them.

Ollie is the first to stand. His face is kind, his eyes soft with understanding. He licks his lips before speaking, "Laura, I'm sorry we jumped the gun." He turns back to the others behind him briefly. "I think I can speak for all of us in saying that we find it hard to be around you but not close to you."

"Why, what's happening? You do feel it don't you?" My last words come out as more of a hiss than a question.

Dante takes the lead by stepping closer to me. "Yes we feel it." He confirms with a heavy look in my direction.

"What is it you feel exactly?" I question in confusion, but I'm hoping I can make some sense of the craziness that has become my life.

"A connection, a strong connection. One that we've known was going to happen and we've been waiting for."

"I don't understand what you mean." My voice is almost shrill. I shake my head unable to accept what he's saying.

The three of them share a look between themselves, and Dante again takes the lead when he asks in his usual low rumble, "You don't know anything?" At my blank look he continues almost in a whisper, "Anything about who or what you are?" He seems apprehensive, worried even, but he sounds a little skeptical.

“Of course, I know who I am,” I scoff at him.

Heels clicking on the worn tiles of the school halls stops our conversation in its tracks. Delaney and two friends saunter up the stairs at an unhurried pace. Each of them personifies perfection with their expertly styled hair and clothes.

The guys’ heads, which are already trained in their direction, follow them up the stairwell. Milo takes a step down, bringing himself closer to the girls, but Ollie stops him dead with a hand on his shoulder. After a long second Milo shrugs off the boy’s touch and turns back to face me. He looks angry, his face is red and his lips are tight, I think he might just start yelling any minute.

I take another step away from them. There's no way I want his stormy eyes pointed at me right now.

“Hey,” Delaney purrs without a shred of self-preservation.

“I thought we were meeting at the front lobby, in like five minutes?” Dante sighs with a small shake of his head.

Delaney shrugs a delicate shoulder. “What can I say, I couldn't wait.” Her hand goes to the flare of her narrow hip and she arches her back slightly, pushing her chest out. Everything about her is suggestive, her skirt has to border on a dress code violation, and her painted red lips are turned up in a sultry smirk.

The two girls with her seem a little less bold but are equally alluring.

Dante, whose back seems rigid, pushes up the sleeve of his gray thermal shirt, exposing his toned forearms. The black leather cuff encircling his wrist catches my eye and I can’t seem to look away.

I need to know what's beneath that thick band. I take a step forward to do just that when Ollie’s voice jars me from my intended target, a good thing too. With my single-minded focus, I didn't even care that I would have looked crazy pawing at him with his girlfriend standing a few feet away.

With that thought, a cold sinking feeling washes over me, effectively reminding me I have no place here. Looking at the ground, I miss the fact that Milo and Ollie have moved past Dante and up to me until I feel Ollie’s fingers under my chin, forcing my head up so I meet his eyes.

“Sorry I started this here,” he says with a grimace. “Can we talk after school?” I nod without thought; his clear green eyes don't give me much of an option.

“I need to get to class,” I mutter when my tongue becomes unglued from

the roof of my mouth. Ollie gives me a cheeky wink, letting the seriousness that had invaded our conversation fall away.

I turn and dash for the open doorframe that will take me to the hall where my locker is, and away from these confusing boys, but I don't make it far. I let my back hit the wall to catch my breath.

I hear murmurs from the stairwell when I'm settled enough to take a deep breath and the buzzing in my ears subsides.

Dante's low growl is broken by Milo's urgent hiss, "I don't care what promises you made. I'm tired of her sniffing around every time you're out of her sight. I'm not letting her, or you ruin this."

Deliberately stepping closer to eavesdrop I hear Ollie, in a much quieter voice, soothe as he says, "that's not going to happen Milo, because Dante won't let it. He knows how important this is." He pauses before he adds, "To all of us."

With that I push away from the wall and rush in the opposite direction.

Last hour comes way too fast, not only do I have to sit next to Dante in art, but I also told Ollie we could talk after school. I've already made several excuses in my head as to why I'd need to rush home instead of talking with them, but all the cop-outs sound lame, even to me.

The only one that could get me out of it easily would be to tell them the truth, that my mom disappeared.

I'm not ready for anyone to know that.

Avoiding them tonight will not get me any closer to the answers I want either, but I do need to be careful around them. I don't want Delaney getting the wrong idea.

I haven't missed all the snide little remarks she makes every time I've passed her in the halls or the cunning way she watches me in class. There's no way she's going to let me slip back into invisibility.

Surprisingly, Dante is at our table before me. It's a first. I'm not sure if I was that slow getting here, or if he rushed.

His head is down looking at his wrist as I enter. As soon as I breach the door, his head pops up and his eyes land on me. My step falters under his scrutiny. The way he's looking at me makes me want to turn around and run, not walk, out of the room.

Dante stands like he knows exactly what I'm thinking, and he'd be willing to chase me if I did. His head tilts to the side and his eyes, which seemed so intense seconds ago, soften.

The hard edge of his jaw relaxes and it changes his appearance completely. I go from wanting to run away from him, to run toward him instead.

With a small shake of my head I remember I can't. Not only because he has a girlfriend, a girlfriend who isn't very nice and he isn't very nice to either, but because I can't let anyone know me. My mom would freak out if she knew I was even entertaining the idea of talking to him and the other guys.

That thought reminds me it might not even matter anymore, mom's gone. Maybe for good.

I take a few tentative steps forward. Dante pulls out my stool as I round the table.

"Hi Laura," he drawls in his deep baritone.

My heart thuds painfully hard once, before rushing on in a quick staccato.

"Hi Dante," I reply while putting my bag on the floor and sliding onto my stool. Mr. Adams saves me seconds later when he calls the class to attention.

Thankfully we're both too busy finishing up our portraits to do any talking through the rest of the class.

I have been sneaking looks at him every chance I get though, sometimes when I do, he's already looking at me.

"All right guys, we have until Thursday to get all these beautiful faces ready for display. Principal Cooksey and I will select three works from each grade for submission into the Scholastic Art Awards.

As you all know it's a pretty big deal to be selected and an even bigger honor to win. So, leave a little of yourselves on the paper for everyone to see and maybe, just maybe, one of you will walk away with a pretty nice scholarship in a few months."

The noise level in the class picks up a bit after his announcement; excitement floats in the air, settling on everyone's shoulders with weight.

Dante stares at his drawing, it's so amazingly detailed I would believe it was a photograph if I hadn't seen all the work he's put into it over the last week.

"It's really beautiful, I bet you'll win." My words flow out easily. Not just a compliment, but full honesty.

His head turns, and his eyes meet mine and he looks sad, almost troubled. His mouth parts on an inhale before he whispers, "I thought I wanted that."

“But?” I ask when it seems like there is one.

“But I'm not so sure anymore. It doesn't feel important anymore, ya know?” His words are softly spoken, like he's not sure he should even say them out loud.

“I think it's important. What you can do... the way you can make it looks so real. It's really a gift. Something you should be proud of.” I don't know where the words come from, but they're the truth. He is gifted.

“Thank you.” He sounds a little surprised.

The bell rings and neither of have returned our stuff to the back of the room. As the other students start to scatter, I look away from his amber eyes and rush through sorting my things.

When I return to get my bag, he's still standing at the table, waiting for me. I look at the empty doorway, expecting to see Delaney slithering through any second.

“Ready?”

I nod even though I'm not. My tongue feels thick in my mouth when I mutter, “I'll just meet you, go on ahead.”

Dante's brow furrows. “I thought we'd just walk together.”

“Aren't you meeting Delaney?” He looks shocked for a brief moment.

“No, why would you think... never mind. Let's get out of here.”

I follow him from class, still nervous we might be seen together. I feel guilty the whole way because Delaney has every right to not want me hanging out with her boyfriend. Not when he makes my heart beat so fast, and how hearing him speak is like being covered with a warm blanket.

Dante leads us through the quickly emptying halls, past the old gym and to a set of taupe double doors. Pushing through, sunlight pours in, brightening the dim corridor.

When my eyes adjust, I see the back parking lot of the school. Several cars are still parked out here; a few of them seem rather nice for a bunch of high school students.

I spot Ollie's light hair as he stands looking in our direction. He's positioned in the open passenger door with his elbow propped on the roof. Looking at him gives me the same dip in my stomach I get when I see Dante.

Guess I haven't let go of the crush yet, seems I have a thing for unavailable boys.

A sly smile lights his face as we approach. “I was sure we'd have to hunt you down girl.” His voice is light, teasing even. Without any real answer I

give an uncommitted shrug, pulling the strap of my bag higher on my shoulder.

A heavy silence settles over us as we cluster around Dante's car.

I hear Milo nearing moments later, his feet crunching over the broken blacktop as he hurries over at a near jog.

“Hey,” he pants, not really out of breath, but I can tell he rushed to get here. The butterflies get impossibly stronger and my cheeks heat with something almost like embarrassment.

The way I’m surrounded by these boys makes me feel different, and not in a bad way. But in a way I'm completely unfamiliar with. I'm tempted to run.

Why am I here? Why are they even talking to me, and why, after all these years of never getting close to anyone, do I want to be here with them?

Now that Milo has arrived, Dante walks around the back of the car and opens the trunk. The hinges whine in a way only older cars do as he holds up the hatch. His black t-shirt rides up, giving me a view of his side and a glimpse of his stomach. I look away quickly, embarrassed how it makes me want to see more.

He tosses his bag in and the other two boys do the same. I grip my shoulder strap tighter, not ready to let go of it. Dante looks over at me, and his eyes slide down to my hands where they clutch my bag over my chest. Without a word he lets the lid go, and it drops down with a harsh slam.

“Shotgun,” Oliver exclaims, but Milo jabs him with an elbow and nods in my direction. “Oh yeah, Laura you want front or back?” he asks, not missing a beat as he nears the passenger door.

I don't know why, but it’s at this moment it actually sinks in that I might leave school with them. I never really thought about where we were going to talk.

Dante speaks up, “I thought we would head over to my place. No one else is there, but if you'd rather go to your house, we could do that.”

“No,” I whisper. “My place... it's not... we can't really go there right now.” I lie.

Oliver steps closer to me and drops his arm around my neck. The warm tingle reminds me why I need to do this. “Come on Laura, you look like you’re about to get in the car with a stranger offering candy. I promise you’ll be perfectly safe, and we'll be on our best behavior.” His pointer finger makes a small X over his heart and he grins down at me.

I peer over at Milo and wonder if he can tell how I feel with Oliver touching me. Would he still have the easy smirk on his face if he knew about the butterflies in my stomach?

No, I don't think he would.

I pull away and look down. "The back is fine, you called the front."

"Damn," Oliver curses and when I look up, he and Milo are staring at each other. Milo's smirk has jacked up to a full-blown smile.

I shuffle in and scoot over so I'm behind the driver's seat and Milo wedges himself in next to me. He grunts when he falls into the seat.

"We need to get a different car man. I'm tired of crawling in and out of the backseat."

Dante's hand caresses the dashboard. "Not giving her up."

I lean to the side and let the strap of my bag slide off my arm. It drops to the floor and I settle back in the seat.

T E N

*A*s the rumble of the engine purrs to life, I have a second of indecision. I know my life is changing, veering into something I scarcely recognize. I also know getting out of the car now wouldn't stop the changes from coming, maybe delay them, but probably not.

Dante pulls out of the school lot, making a right turn. Oliver reaches over to the radio, tapping the power button. Instinctively I slam my palms over my ears when it blares to life. He fumbles for only a second before the volume drops dramatically.

"Holy loud Batman," I utter in shock.

Milo, who feels entirely too close to me in the small backseat, chuckles.

"You'll get used to it. Dante is half deaf." From the small grin on his face, I think he's joking about the Dante being deaf part.

Oliver throws his elbow over the front bench seat, turning to face us. He eyes the space between Milo and I before peering at me.

"Hi," he offers with a sweet smile tipping his lips.

I blush, and I don't even know why. "Hi Ollie," my voice is small. It's the first time I've used his nickname, I hadn't even planned on it. That's just what came out.

He bites the corner of his mouth and breathes in deep. Milo reaches forward and pushes his arm off the back of the seat, a little too hard, if the look on Ollie's face tells me anything.

I look down at my lap, feeling like I just got caught. Was I flirting?

Milo leans into my space a few moments later. I tense, expecting him to warn me off his boyfriend, instead he says, "I'm starving, how about you? You hungry?"

I glance at him from the corner of my eye. He doesn't look angry. I turn my head enough to see him slouched in the seat, his legs spread wide to accommodate the front passenger seat.

I'm actually starving. I didn't get my lunch today, but I'm not sure eating would be a good idea.

"Maybe a little." I shrug.

Milo angles forward on the seat and leans to Dante's side of the car, bringing him even closer to me. I push back into my seat. Feeling like I'm taking up too much space.

"Let's hit a drive-thru. I'm hungry and I don't feel like making anything when we get home."

Dante's head turns to his friend, then his eyes find me in the backseat through the rearview mirror.

"I'm down," Ollie replies.

I order a cheeseburger with no mustard and an iced coffee. Hoping the sugar and caffeine will help me get through the next hour. The guys call out several numbers, each ordering more than a single meal.

Before we even pull up to the window, I have five singles flattened out, which I'd retrieved from my bag. I lean forward enough that the cash is over Dante's shoulder. He looks over at me, then down to the money in my hand. He opens his mouth like he was going to say something, but stops himself.

His right arm bends and he pulls the cash from my hand, his fingers brushing mine. I like the way his skin feel rougher than mine.

"Wait, yours was like two bucks. This is too much." I shrug. They had a twenty-nine dollar order, five dollars is all I can contribute but I want them to know I can.

"It's fine."

His eyes meet mine again in the mirror, but the drive-up window opens at the exact same time.

"Twenty-eight, seventy-seven," says a boy that looks a little older than us. He barely even glances into the car as Dante hands over a card.

Seconds later the window opens again, and the card pops back out with a practiced, "have a nice day," as the window snaps closed again.

Dante pulls forward and the girl at the next window is ready with a drink tray loaded with large sodas.

She smiles when Dante leans out with both hands to grab the tray. He shoves it over to Oliver and reaches right back for my iced coffee.

She leans forward on the windowsill, enough so her head peeks out, “It’ll be just a minute. We’re waiting on fries. Can you guys pull up and I’ll run it out as soon as it’s ready?”

“Here you go Laura.” Dante hands me my drink and straw before giving the girl at the window a nod.

Milo leans over me. His hand lands on my thigh just above the knee. “Can we have some ranch please?” He’s looking up at the girl.

I suck in a breath and his head turns to stare at me instead. Our eyes connect, and I have the strangest feeling. I want to lean forward and kiss him. The way his tongue makes a lazy lap over his top lip, I think he knows. He might even let me.

The car moves forward at a crawl. I snap my head to the left and Milo leans back into his seat, removing his hand from my leg.

The spot he covered feels cold now in comparison.

I open my straw and shove it into my drink, grateful I have something to distract me from the stupid mistake I wanted to make.

Oliver passes out the other drinks while we wait for the food to arrive.

A few kids from school pass in front of the car and Dante gives them a nod after they shout out, “Hey guys!”

Oliver is more welcoming, he waves and answers with a, “What’s up?” One of the guys comes over to the passenger window and leans down to look in the car. He does a double take when he sees me in the backseat. I move my head, pretending to look outside.

“So... what are you guys up to?” he asks slowly.

Dante doesn’t even look in his direction.

“Just grabbing a bite to eat,” Oliver replies easily.

“Here you go. Sorry about the wait guys.” The girl from the drive-up window leans down and whispers conspiratorially, “I threw in a dozen cookies, don’t tell my boss.” Her smile goes mostly unnoticed, as Dante is busy handing food bags over to Oliver.

“Thanks,” he mutters dismissing her.

Her eyes roam over the car and the other guys crowded around it before she turns back toward the lobby.

“Going,” is Dante’s only warning as he lets his foot off the brake and we roll forward slowly.

“See ya!” Oliver yells back to the guy he was talking to. “You don’t always have to be such a dick,” Oliver accuses while pawing through the fast

food bags.

“Didn’t think I was,” Dante replies.

Milo’s head tilts close to mine. “They can argue about anything,” he mock whispers.

“I thought it was you two that were the old married couple,” I whisper back pointing between Milo and Ollie.

Milo’s mouth drops open. There’s a second when I think I might have offended him before he lets a grin free, shrugging his shoulder into mine.

“What are you two whispering about? They’re whispering back there Dante,” Oliver rats us out like a toddler.

My eyes immediately go to the rearview mirror where I see Dante already watching at me. Milo bumps his shoulder into mine again and Dante tracks the movement before looking away.

“It’s your fault they’re back there together. Now you’ll have to deal with the consequences.”

Oliver produces a long fry from the bag and leans over the seat. “Here,” he says while focusing on me.

“I didn’t get any fries.” He shrugs, then leans forward more, bringing the fry close to my lips. I open to take it on instinct.

Oliver grins at me. When I pull back he holds on to the fry, so it breaks off and he’s left holding a small piece.

Milo leans forward and snatches the bite right from Oliver’s fingers, using only his mouth.

“Knock it off Ollie,” Milo warns while chewing.

Feeling chastised, I swallow the salty fry and look down.

“You’re no fun,” Oliver mumbles as he crumples the top of the bags, closing the food up. Now that I’ve had one bite I’m starving. I hope we get wherever we’re going soon.

Dante turns down a tree lined blacktop road. I can’t see any houses, but I see a few mailboxes and driveways leading off each side.

He slows to a crawl then turns left on a single lane road. After a few hundred feet, the trees give way and I see a fairly large house stationed in the middle of a clearing.

It’s a cheery yellow with a wraparound front porch. There’s even a swing and a few rocking chairs with thick padded cushions. The front entry has a wooden screen door with an intricate design. The upstairs has a row of long windows, and above that are two arched windows, indicating an attic.

It's quaint and homey looking. It's completely opposite of what I'd expect Dante's house to look like. He heads up the drive and around the side of the house, parking in front of a large detached garage.

The car doors open as soon as the engine is off and the quiet invades my ears, leaving a ringing in its place.

Dante shoves the seat forward and his hand thrusts down to me. I take his palm, stepping out of the car and releasing it immediately. The tingle is still there, reminding me why I'm here with these guys.

I look around the property. There's a waist high black metal fence surrounding an inground pool. It butts right up against the house with a large patio area between the pool and a couple of French doors.

I feel a tug on my fingers. Milo tilts his head, beckoning me to follow Dante and Milo, who are disappearing through a side door of the garage.

I plunge my straw in and out of my drink a few times, stalling, then trail after Milo.

The door opens to a set of stairs leading up. I can't see into the garage, but there's another door to the left that looks like it leads in that direction.

"Laura," Oliver calls down from somewhere above me. Milo waves his hand for me to go ahead of him up the flight of stairs.

I rush up, feeling self-conscious about him being behind me. I'm not even sure why, it's not like he'll be checking out my butt.

At the top it opens to an expansive loft. My eyes immediately land on a big bed that Dante is hastily throwing covers on to make the bed.

Milo searches through the numerous bags on a low table in front of a leather couch. Satisfied, with his hands full, he drops back onto the sofa with a humph. "Come grab your food," he says around a mouth full.

"Do you mind if I use... is there a bathroom? So, I can wash my hands," I stammer and set my half full coffee on the table next to someone else's drink.

Dante gives up fixing the bed. "Yeah sure, right here." He kicks at something. I hear it slide across the hardwood floor before he hurriedly opens the only door I see.

"Shit," he curses as soon as the door opens. His eyes find mine as I approach. "Give me like, one second." He doesn't wait for my reply, just flies through the door, closing it behind him.

I hear a few drawers and cabinet doors opening and closing before he comes out a brief moment later. Face red.

“Sorry, it’s just usually me and the guys,” he says, not meeting my eyes as he gives the explanation.

I leave the door open as he passes by, heading back toward the others.

There’s a toilet against the far wall with a tiled shower directly across from it. A few bottles of soap sit on the ground, with a single bar of yellowish soap placed on a small ledge built into the wall. I inhale, pulling the clean musky scent of the soap in.

Surprisingly the bathroom is really clean. A few small white smears surround the sink and a couple spots dot the mirror, but that’s the only defect I can find.

I make my way over to the long black counter and note the three toothbrushes, all resting upright in a tumbler.

Do they all live here? There’s only one bed. That I saw anyway, well and the couch. Maybe they just stay over often enough to have them here. What even is this place, his apartment? Who lives in the house?

When I exit, the guys are close together whispering fervently. I clear my throat and they stop immediately.

It’s Oliver, not surprisingly, who breaks the awkward silence that follows. “Come eat, it’s already pretty cold.”

Milo is on the floor in front of the table, his legs spread wide as he leans on one hand while eating a burger with the other. Dante grabs a box of fries from the table and sits on the arm of the couch. He digs in, fully engrossed with his food. My cheeseburger is out next to Oliver’s food.

I sit as near the middle between the two boys as I can, putting me on two cushions, then grab my sandwich.

The uncomfortable silence is back, and the same feeling I had when we first sat together at the diner invades my body. I’m super self aware, and hyper alert of them as well. My wrapper seems loud as I pull back the paper, making me slow my movements.

Milo stretches out more on the floor, leaning on his side to look over at us. His head is propped on his hand, while his other arm is draped over his side, leaving his hand low on his stomach. He reaches up to brush something off his shirt and the fabric lifts up, exposing the waistband of his dark gray jogger pants. He doesn’t seem to notice so I focus on my food keep from staring.

Oliver is next to me, and he scoots closer, grabbing his soda from the table. Instead of moving away, he stays with his hip pressed to mine. I’m

tempted to move over, but I don't.

After two bites of my burger I can barely swallow. I'm overwhelmed with their presence. I've never been the center of anyone's attention. Not even my mom's. She's always too wrapped up in her own issues to worry about me.

I fold the paper over my burger and set it on the table, sliding forward so only my butt remains on the couch cushion.

Just when I'm about to ask for an explanation about why I'm here and what they think they know about me, a phone rings.

I look at Dante who stands up to pull a phone from the front pocket of his dark wash jeans. He looks at the screen then over to me. He stabs his finger on the surface and tucks his phone back away, only to have it ring again almost immediately. He shakes his head pulling it free again.

"Yeah," he answers, walking over to one of the few windows.

There are no drapes or blinds, so he's bathed in afternoon sunlight. He looks out toward the large house before turning and facing the room again. He listens for a few seconds and his eyes fall closed slowly. His head falls back on his shoulders and his chest expands in a deep inhale.

Oliver bumps me with his shoulder to get my attention. When I look over he smiles at me and offers me a cold fry. I wrinkle my nose at the thought and shake my head in denial.

His grin gets even wider before he plops it into his own mouth.

"Yeah, I got it," comes Dante's rough reply. His voice is hard. Not for the first time I wonder who it is.

I lean close to Oliver. His eyebrows shoot up, but he doesn't object. I turn my head just a little, so my mouth is near his ear. "Should we go? Are we going to get him in trouble?" I'm not sure what's brought me to that conclusion, but I feel like me being here might cause a problem.

Oliver leans closer; I swear I feel him shiver once before he rolls his shoulders. I pull back to look at him and his eyes are half closed. The clear green is clouded with something akin to sleepiness.

He pulls his bottom lip past his teeth, and then inclines his head back, telling me to lean close again. His lips graze my ear as he breathes, "He's not in trouble. Wouldn't matter if he was."

I swear I feel the tip of his tongue against the bottom of my earlobe right before Dante barks, "I said I got it!"

I jump away from Oliver's warm breath, my heart beating fast, and not because Dante just yelled at someone.

I put some much needed space between us, scooting into the corner of the sofa Dante just vacated. I run my hands over my thighs several times, afraid to look at Milo. I can't let him see how affected I am right now. I think his boyfriend just nibbled my ear, and I liked it.

I'm way out of my element here. I've never had so much as a friend, let alone three gorgeous boys giving me attention. I don't know how to handle it.

Dante walks into the bathroom and closes the door behind him with the phone still at his ear.

I feel the cushion next to me dip and look to see Milo taking up the position between Oliver and myself.

My neck feels hot, I'm completely embarrassed. How could Oliver do that with Milo sitting right here, and how does he behave when he's not around, does he flirt with everyone? I wouldn't be able to handle that. It reminds me how dismissive Dante is with Delaney. Maybe they're both terrible boyfriends, or maybe I don't know what I'm talking about. Maybe that's how all teenagers are. Not all relationships are serious, maybe that's just the way they act.

I still wouldn't be able to deal with it.

"You didn't eat much, there's still a ton of food left. I know Dante has some snack stuff up here to if you want something else." Milo's voice is level, calm, as he offers me kindness. I feel like a total dirt-bag.

I can't even voice my denial, instead I shake my head no, watching the stairs. I think I should go. I don't belong here. Just as I move to stand the bathroom door opens and Dante comes out. He's off the phone, but his brows are drawn, and his jaw is clenched.

Milo's hand lands on my knee, he leaves it there without any explanation or reason. The weight and warmth gives me pause. The guys give touch so freely. I let my body ease into the cushion behind me and Milo relaxes with me. His palm drags up my leg and falls off to the side. He keeps it there, lightly toying with the seam of my baggy jeans.

"I don't want to get you in trouble."

Dante's eyes narrow and he opens his mouth before he frowns.

"I mean, I just thought... I asked Oliver, and he said it wasn't about me... us being here, but I just wanted you to know. I can go. I don't want to get you in trouble." I peer at Milo, I want him to know that's what I was asking Oliver.

Dante catches my attention when he waves his hand. “Seriously it’s nothing like that,” he responds, dismissing me easily. He walks over to the table and grabs a box with a hamburger inside, flipping the lid back. He looks at it with no real interest but picks it up anyway, taking the first bite. Without a word he comes over to the arm of the chair again and sits.

“Here, sit.” I jump up and back away from them. One because it’s his room, house, whatever, so he should be able to sit. And two because their nearness does something to me that I’m not ready to look too closely at.

All three guys are watching me, making me even more uncomfortable. “Laura, I’m fine. There are other places I can sit.” Dante motions with the burger still in hand to his bed or a desk chair near it.

“It’s your house. You should be able to sit.”

“Like I said. I am.” Dante’s brows rise in challenge. Completely comfortable after the weird phone call, he looks over at his friends. “Gonna need more furniture.”

“I’ve been wanting you to get a couple chairs for a while,” Milo points out. Dante slides down into the seat I abandoned and pulls a lever on the side, extending the leg rest of a recliner as if to prove a point. Milo rolls his eyes then turns to look back at me. I fidget under their gazes. Crossing my arms then uncrossing them just to shove my hands in my pockets.

“Soooo...” I prompt. I don’t know how to ask them about the strangeness I feel when they touch me. Earlier when it was happening it was natural, now I feel like they’re going to think I’m crazy.

Oliver pats the tiny space between him and Milo. He scoots a little closer to the arm. “Come sit, let’s finish eating.”

I eye the space where he’s indicating I should sit, skeptically. Milo even beckons me forward after he scoots as close to Dante as he can.

Blushing at the thought of being crammed between them, I shake my head in refusal.

“No, no it’s okay. Eat, I’m fine down here.” I sit on the floor in the same spot where Milo was laying earlier. Keeping the table between us. The guys readjust themselves back to a more normal position on the sofa.

Dante lifts up the arm of his side of the sofa and brings a long black remote out. He points it behind me and loud music flares to life. He grimaces while still pointing behind me. “Sorry,” he mutters when it’s a more subdued volume, before placing the remote back where he got it. I’m not familiar with the song, but the music has a hard driving beat I’d qualify as rock.

Milo and Ollie seem to be done eating, so it's just Dante finishing up. Milo gets up and heads over to a large TV hung on the wall behind me. He grabs a couple remotes to a gaming system and drops one in my lap as he passes. "What do you play?" he questions, plopping down next to me. I turn so we're both facing the TV.

"I don't." I shrug, picking up the surprisingly light controller. It's white and black with a digital camo print. There's a rectangular black pad in the middle. I flip it over and see additional buttons on the back.

"You don't like video games?" Milo continues as the TV screen comes to life.

"I've just never really played them."

"Well that's just not acceptable. A little mindless killing is good for your soul," Milo mutters.

"I don't think you'll find many people who agree with you on that. In fact, I think most people would vehemently disagree with you."

Milo chuckles then reaches over and taps a button on my remote, bringing it to life.

We've only barely made my character, a kick ass chick with bright hair and skintight clothes when Ollie drops down on the other side of me. He places his palms flat on the ground, one behind me, and leans back. I sneak a peek at him from the corner of my eye, wondering why he didn't sit next to Milo.

"Ignore him. He's trying to distract us so he'll get a turn." Milo sighs while selecting a map, and we're transported to a wasteland where we have to fight for our lives.

At first, I have a hard time controlling my character. I keep moving the wrong stick so I'm looking all around instead of aiming my gun in different directions.

Before long I'm so engrossed in my half of the screen that I don't notice when someone comes up behind me and kills me. My death scene replays in slow motion, as I watch a guy stick a knife in my throat.

"He totally cheated. He snuck up behind me." I'm outraged. That garners a few low chuckles from them.

"That's all part of the game sweetheart. My turn." Ollie snatches my remote. He *re-spawns* as they call it in a completely different area of the map. Within seconds he's running and shooting everyone with skilled efficiency. He slows, stalking behind someone and pulls the same maneuver

that was done to me. “There, got him back for you,” he boasts, and without missing a beat he’s off and running. The screen moves so fast it’s almost dizzying.

I look over my shoulder and spy Dante watching us with a tiny grin tipping his lips.

He crooks his finger, urging me to him. I jostle Oliver a bit when I crawl in front of him, so I don’t block the TV. His eyes drop to me and his hands stop flying over the buttons. I hear the death gurgle I’ve come to recognize from a sniper knife attack.

“Not fair,” he mumbles still watching me. I stand when I’ve cleared the viewing area and move to the opposite side of the sofa, leaving an empty cushion between Dante and me.

This is nice and all; I’ve never really got to just hang out with anyone like this, but I really need to find out what’s going on. Why I feel this bizarre connection to them, and more importantly why I’m craving the feeling they invoke when they touch my skin.

Dante blinks at me slowly, he’s always so quiet. Never saying more than what’s absolutely necessary. Even when we were at the diner, Milo and Ollie did most of the talking.

“It’s getting kind of late,” I utter, hoping they’ll get the hint.

“Where did you move from?” Dante asks, surprising me.

“Michigan,” I respond without thought.

“And before that?”

“Wyoming, why?”

“And before that?”

I take a second to remember. We don’t always change states, sometimes just from one city to the next. “What does it matter?”

“I’m just trying to figure out some things,” Dante answers innocently.

“Well isn’t that why I’m here? You acted like you knew something about me.”

The noise of the video game cuts off, leaving only the low hum of music behind.

“I’m just trying—” a throat clears interrupting Dante, before he starts again, “We’re just trying to figure how it is you’re here, and seem to be completely in the dark about what we are, and more importantly, what you are.”

I throw my hands in the air. “See, that’s what I’m talking about. How is it

you pretend to know me, but apparently you don't have a clue yourself?" I stand up. Done with this whole thing. The tingles I've been feeling can probably be chalked up to regular teenage hormones. There isn't anything special happening here, just a couple of boys playing with the new girl's head. "Can you just take me home or drop me off at the diner? I'll walk from there," I rush out.

"Laura," Oliver calls to me.

"What?" My tone should tell him I'm not in the mood to joke around. He takes my hand in his. The strange feeling starts in my palm and moves up my wrist. While I'm looking down at our hands, distracted, Milo comes over and takes my other hand. The feeling intensifies. Making its way over my chest. My breath catches on a gasp. It doesn't hurt, nothing close to it, but it's unfamiliar. I look up as Dante approaches from the front. Lifting a hand, he runs his fingers gently over the crest of my cheekbone. When his palm cradles my cheek, everything stops. Time itself seems to stand still.

My heart starts anew with a hard thump in my chest. A metallic taste fills my mouth as my body flushes, sweat dotting my upper lip. A wave of dizziness washes over me. I stumble forward, squeezing Milo and Ollie's hands on instinct to stay upright. I pant out a breath as hot saliva fills my mouth; I'm seconds away from puking.

"Whoa," I drop my forehead to Dante's chest. Waiting for the feeling to subside.

"It's okay, it's okay," Milo croons several times. His eyes widen when I tilt my face to look over at him.

"What the hell was that?" My voice is a rough whisper, hysteria is edging in.

"He'll know now," Dante mutters.

A hand brushes up my back and I realize I've glued myself to his front and Milo and Ollie are equally stuck to my sides. I'm completely surrounded. I swallow, confusion making me wary. I back away from them, shaking my hands free. "Who will know now?"

Dante cups my cheek and searches my eyes. "My brother," he sighs. "He'll know we found you."

ELEVEN

Confused doesn't begin to describe what I'm feeling. "I don't understand what's happening here." My voice shakes nearly as much as the tremor that starts working its way up my body. Everything feels different. I feel twitchy, on edge, like I'm missing something, or I'm supposed to be someplace I've forgotten.

Dante's phone rings again, jarring me from my thoughts. His eyes don't veer from my face as he ignores it. This is all too much. I take two steps back, pulling further away from them and shake my head free of the fog that is trying to consume me. What just happened isn't normal, these aren't some rampant teenage hormones, this is something I can't explain. "Who are you people, what are you doing to me?" My eyes scan the room looking for an escape. I can't be here anymore. I have to get out of this place.

Ollie steps forward, his hand outstretched in an offering of calmness. "Laura, please don't freak out."

"Freak out? I'm really close to losing my shit. I need to know what the hell is going on here. You can start by telling me how you're doing this shit, did you put something in my drink?" My eyes immediately find the iced coffee still sitting on the table with only ice and a tiny bit of watered down liquid in the bottom.

Milo huffs out a breath, then moves around the others, snatching up my cup. With his eyes firmly locked on mine he takes the straw between his lips and takes a deep pull, drinking every drop left, so there's a loud slurping sound. He lets out an exaggerated sigh before placing it back on the table.

"Really Milo, I'd expect this from Dante, but why are you acting like a dick? Laura, ignore him, this is messing with all of us." He takes his eyes

from his *boyfriend*, and stares at me with big rounded puppy-dog eyes.

Dante is frozen behind him; his eyes widen and all the color drains from his face. “We have a problem,” he mutters.

“No shit,” Milo barks out.

“No, a bigger problem.” Dante grimaces before grabbing his forehead and squeezing at the temples. “He’s coming.”

Ollie’s hand smacks down on his leg. “Fuck,” he curses. His neck twists looking between the three of us before he hesitantly takes a few steps closer to me. “I wanted more time to do this. You have to understand, there’s no way we could have known you didn’t have a clue about us. I’m not even sure how it’s possible, but clearly you have no idea.”

My arms cross over my stomach, and I hunch forward. I lick my bottom lip as my teeth sink into the plumpness. I’m afraid. Not really of these boys, I don’t know why, but I don’t think they’re going to hurt me. I’m scared of what’s happening to us.

Ollie reaches his hand out, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “I’m sorry we didn’t understand how very difficult this would be for you.” His eyes stare into mine and his brows pull together. I want to run my hand over the crease there.

“I don’t understand any of this,” I confess. Ollie’s lips turn down in a frown before the hand at my ear drops to my shoulder and he wraps his arms around me in an embrace.

“Please don’t worry Laura, I promise this is a good thing,” he breathes into my ear. After a brief moment he releases me, leaving one arm slung around my shoulders, then turns us to face the other two in the room. Milo is sulking near the table he got my drink from and Dante is still standing where I left him. I look everywhere but at their faces, I don’t want to see the judgment I feel would be there. “The last thing I want to do is leave you without any answers, but Dante said Ares is coming, and if he’s coming we need you to be gone. Things will go from bad to worse if he finds you here.” I glance over at Dante and note his stiff posture, and the hard set of his jaw.

“Can you take me home?” I ask, and as soon as I say it I feel a pang in my chest, like my heart knows I’m making the wrong choice. But my head needs time to catch up with what’s going on; I’m completely overwhelmed.

Milo spins on his heel, turning away from me. There it is, the judgment I knew was coming. I drop my head, feeling shame over something I don’t understand.

Dante rumbles out an affirmative response before I have the chance to change my mind and demand answers. I pull out from under Ollie's arm and grab my backpack from the floor. When I lift the strap to sling it over my shoulder, the strap snaps, and the contents of the bag spill out onto the carpet. I sigh with defeat while dropping to my knees to shove everything back in.

A large hand lands on mine. When I look up, Dante is crouched in front of me, his eyes searching mine. "This didn't go the way any of us expected." I can't help but feel like I've let him down, that I'm lacking in some way.

I tug my hand out from under his, and leaving a few of the papers on the ground I stand on shaky legs. "I need to go." I can't meet any of their gazes. I just want to be back in my tiny RV, where I know who I am. I don't wait for a reply; I rush to the stairs and run down them as fast as my legs will carry me.

Before any of them are out the door I'm already in the backseat, crammed as far into the corner as I can manage, with my useless backpack on my lap as a shield.

Ollie glances into the car, before getting behind the wheel. "Ah, it's just you and me so you can jump up here." The lightness in his tone seems forced.

I gaze up to the garage windows, not seeing anyone but knowing Milo and Dante are both up there, before gently pushing the seat forward and sliding out. I pull the door closed with a quiet click, before buckling my lap belt and resettling my backpack on my lap.

I look out the side window to keep myself from watching the house or Ollie. He's quiet as he drives down the long lane leading from the garage. He comes to a complete stop at the street. There's no traffic, so I'm not sure what he's waiting for. He shifts in the seat, and my eyes flick over at him. His hands are in his lap, and he's staring down not looking at the road.

"Ollie." His eyes leap up to meet mine. He bites the corner of his lip and gives a slight shake of his head. When he reaches for the steering wheel, I turn back to the window.

The ride home is silent. I have too many questions floating around in my mind to speak to him without demanding answers I'm not sure he's willing to give. When we reach the diner I almost ask him to drop me off there, but the words die on my tongue as he speeds past.

It feels like seconds later when, without direction from me, he pulls over to the side of the road as soon as the sign for Turtle Creek is visible. I take the hint, I'm so eager to get out I forget to unclip the seatbelt. I grunt when it tugs

me back as I try to get out.

“Oh, Laura. You okay?” Ollie winces.

“Fine,” I mutter fumbling with the latch. Once free, I slam the door closed. I don’t look back as I trek down the gravel shoulder to the entrance of the RV park. The car idles in the distance until I’m well into the bowels of the park.



“FUCK!” I SCREAM, STOMPING MY FOOT ON THE GROUND. THE DOOR IS locked, and my keys are nowhere to be found. I drop my backpack on the foldaway stairs leading up to the door of the RV. Crouching low I slowly pull out every piece of paper and book, all the bits of my life I’ve tossed in over the last few months, and still come up empty handed.

I stand and raise my face to the sky. “Why today?” I don’t get an answer, not that I expected one. I check each window and door, knowing they will all be locked up tight. Eventually I make my way back to the front of the park, hoping the guy who fills propane tanks and takes care of the bathrooms is in his mobile home, he’ll probably have a phone so I can call a locksmith. It would be much cheaper to get ahold of Dante to ask if my keys are on his floor with the other shit that fell out of my bag, but there are a few problems. I don’t have his or Ollie’s numbers, and even if I did I probably wouldn’t use it.

I tap on the warped screen door to the trailer in lot number one. It’s a single wide, with a wooden deck. There’s even a shed next to it. This trailer is the kind you’d expect to find in a trailer park, the ones that are actually designed to live in, a true mobile home. I hear a curse, followed by stomping footsteps. The older guy who answers narrows his eyes at me, and then looks behind me. I look over my shoulder out of curiosity. “What’d ya need?” he questions when he’s satisfied there’s no one else with me.

My throat goes dry, “I lost the keys to my RV. I was—”

“Where’s your momma?” he cuts me off.

Not expecting the question, I stammer, trying to come up with a quick answer. “Oh, she... I... just got home from school. I stayed later with a friend to study. I think she was going to turn in some applications today, but I’m not sure when she’s getting back.” The lie stops me from meeting his eyes, but

that's nothing new. "I was hoping to use your phone to call a locksmith."

He swings the screen open in invitation. I don't really want to go inside, but he seems almost as suspicious of me, as I am of him. I skirt around him and enter a surprisingly clean living room. The kitchen is visible just to the left. All the appliances are a dingy olive green, but they're clean and it smells like he just got done with dinner. My stomach chooses that moment to grumble at the fact I haven't been eating very much over the last few days.

Warmth invades my cheeks, but he pretends not to notice as he reaches for a phone sitting on the side table next to the sofa. Using his pointer finger he jabs at the screen a few times, unlocking it before offering it to me. I hadn't thought this through. I have no idea who to call, or how to get the number without a phonebook. "You don't happen to know any companies that would come out here, and not charge me an arm and a leg, do you?"

He heaves a long sigh. "I can call Eddie's grandson. He works over at the service station. You sure you don't wanna just wait on your mamma?" His eyes run down to my shoes, then back up, but he's not leering. It's like he's checking to make sure I'm not going to fall apart in his house.

I shake my head looking over his shoulder. "No sir, I'd appreciate you making that call, she could be awhile." He grunts. He probably thinks my mom is out at some bar, or this is our normal. I don't correct him. It's easier if he thinks that. I don't need him calling CPS or something if he finds out she's gone.

Taking the phone back from my hand, he squints at the display screen. The low hum of the TV draws my attention to the evening news while he makes the call.

"Charlie, hi. This is Mike over at Turtle Creek." He goes quiet, listening to the phone. "Good, I'm good. How's your grandad?" Mike nods his head. "Glad to hear it, I been meaning to stop in and see him... yeah I will. Listen, I have a camper here that's locked out of her mobile home. You got anything to get her door open?" A few more words are exchanged, before he hangs up.

"He's gotta run up to the shop to get a tool, but it shouldn't be more'en twenty minutes."

I rub my finger over my lips, "Thank you sir," I mumble. "I'll go wait by my RV. I really appreciate your help."

"Damn it," he curses under his breath. "Wait, you can stay here while ya wait." He eyes the door leading outside, noting the fading light as evening slides closer.

I wince, not wanting to inconvenience him further. “That’s okay, I’ve interrupted your night enough.”

Mike rocks forward on his toes. “All right then,” he sighs.

I walk slowly back to my RV, stopping at the bathhouse before I clean up the items still on the stairs from my backpack. True to his word it’s not even twenty minutes, before an older blue Ford F-150 creeps up, stopping behind my RV. The door pops open, and a guy around my age hops out. He’s pretty tall, maybe around six feet. His hair is short on the sides, and a little longer in front. He flips his head to the side, pushing his floppy brown hair away from his face.

“Hey, you the one locked out?” He stops mid stride once he looks at me. “You’re the new girl.” He looks behind me, then his eyes quickly snap to the ground.

“Yeah,” I respond answering both of his questions.

“Sorry it took so long. I’m Charlie by the way,” he mutters, tapping a long thin wire against his leg.

I shrug, “I’m just happy you could help.” I clear my throat turning to the front of the mobile home. I make my way over to the driver’s door with him following behind.

“I was worried this wouldn’t work.” He holds the thin wire he was carrying up. “But, with these doors it should be the same as a car or truck, right? I hope, anyway,” he adds under his breath.

After taking one look at the door, he jogs back to his truck, before returning with a green plastic milk crate. He squares it up and stands on top of it. Charlie pulls a small orange blood pressure cuff out of his pocket, placing it on the roof. He slides the long slender tool into the top of the doorframe and wiggles it until it slips down in the door, then turns it so the top doorframe is wedged open. Holding it with his left hand he grabs the cuff with his right arm and shoves the orange balloon part into the gap. With that in place, he grabs the black rubber ball and starts squeezing, inflating the orange cuff so the gap widens enough so he’s able to use the long tool to hook over the pull up knob for the lock. It springs free and he woops in delight. “Can you open the door?” He angles his head down while keeping his hands on both of his tools. I step forward and lift the handle. He leans back enough so the door doesn’t hit him, then pulls his tools away before jumping down off the box.

For the briefest moment I think I might cry, I’m so relieved. Instead I

close my eyes and blow out a deep breath. I want nothing more than to slide in the door and lock myself inside. I stop myself when a throat clears. “Bad day?” he questions after returning the tools to his truck.

“More like a bad year,” I admit hastily “Sorry, let me grab my cash. How much do I owe you?” Charlie stares at me with interest.

“Call it a welcome to town gift.” He grins and rubs the toe of his shoe over the cracked concrete.

I immediately shake my head in refusal. “No, I can’t accept that, please tell me how much I owe you?” Charlie pushes up his shirtsleeve and takes a few steps in my direction.

“Really, it’s no big deal, I wouldn’t feel right taking your money.” The moment the words fall from his lips I step back and drag in a breath. I take a second to look around the RV park and our dingy camper. Charlie’s eyes widen. “No. Not like that. That’s not what I meant.” His forehead wrinkles. “Honestly, if anyone from school called I’d offer the same.” His hands hang at his sides with his shoulders rounded forward. The words still sting, I have no way of knowing if he’s telling the truth or not. I jut my chin up and offer, “Let me give you a couple bucks for your time and the gas you used coming out here, you can grab a burger or something.”

Charlie drops his eyes to the ground but nods his head. “Yeah okay, if that’s what you want.” I think he’s trying to appease me. I rush over to the driver’s door and crawl in over the seat. I hustle back to my room and dig through my sock drawer to find the small roll of bills tucked away, unraveling a twenty-dollar bill.

He’s still waiting for me near his truck when I step out the side entrance. I bite the inside of my cheek and shuffle over to him with the money extended out. Charlie’s eyes go from me to the bill, then back up to my eyes. He hesitates for a brief second then takes the money from my hand, tucking it in his front pocket.

“It’s not much,” I hedge with a small shrug.

“It’s more than enough, everybody else would assume I’d do it for free.” He glances over his shoulder, then cracks his knuckles. “Maybe we could get that burger together?” He’s stiff but smiling.

My mouth falls open, and I feel a tight knot in my stomach, is he asking me out? When I don’t immediately answer Charlie looks away and brings his palm up to the back of his neck.

“Maybe?” I respond hesitantly, hoping he’s just asking to be polite. His

eyes squint at the corners when he smiles at me.

With a quick hop he turns around, heading for his truck. Over his shoulder he calls, "See you at school tomorrow Laura." I'm still standing there dumbfounded when his tail lights turn around the corner. I give into the brief second of panic that I'll see him at school tomorrow. It doesn't last though; I have way too many bigger issues to worry about.

In the RV I rummage through the fridge and cupboards for anything that doesn't make me want to vomit on sight. I settle on a cup of ramen noodles. While I'm waiting for the water to heat in the microwave, I strip off my jeans and grab the first pair of sleep shorts I see crumpled on the end of my bed.

I manage to eat half the cup before I'm ready to fall asleep. I feel like I might be coming down with a cold. My body is achy and sore, and I've been fighting off a headache for days. Leaning back on the couch I close my eyes. Images of Dante, Ollie, and Milo come to me the moment I do. Dante standing right in front of me looking down, his lips slightly parted, his light eyes holding me captive. The heat of Milo and Ollie closed in around me.

I rub my shaking hand over my face, trying to dispel the images. I don't have time to worry about my crush, and these boys' crazy tricks. Now that I'm alone, away from their overwhelming presence, I can think more clearly. They're playing games with me, trying to freak out the new girl. Half the school probably knows by now that I fell for it.

I need to focus my attention on my mom. I need to figure out where she is. I can't make a police report; I'm a few months shy of eighteen. If they knew I was living here on my own, they'd probably try to put me into the system. I could have asked Mike, the camp host, if he'd seen her or anyone else but now it would seem suspicious.

I can't wrap my head around her deciding to leave and not take me with her. She's never done anything close to this before. I think over the last few days before she disappeared. Is there something I'm missing? Some clue she was leaving? The only thing out of the ordinary was how much she was sleeping, and the night I woke up hearing her voice. The same thoughts circle around in my mind over and over, until eventually I fall asleep on the couch curled under her blanket.



I TRUDGE UP THE SIDEWALK TO THE SCHOOL. I DON'T BOTHER LOOKING around, already knowing what I'll see. The same thing as every other school day.

The small bowl of fruity pebbles I ate this morning feels like lead in my stomach, but I still packed a sandwich and drink for lunch.

After counting the money I have left this morning, I'm contemplating stopping by the diner to see if Maggie could use me today or tomorrow. The lot rent is paid for the full month, so I don't have to worry about that yet, but cost of food, and the potential expensive of anything going wrong with the trailer is heavy on my mind. I've already decided I'll just grab a few things from the convenience store when I need them instead of wasting money on gas to drive to the grocery store.

The first couple hours of class drag, every time I look at the clock only minutes have passed. I'm sitting in third hour, doodling on my notes and expecting Ollie to show up any minute. I'm not sure how to act after yesterday. Will he completely ignore me, like he did most of the car ride home? But he never shows up. I make a point to look for him, Dante, and Milo in the halls as I'm changing classes. I spot Delaney and her crew of cronies a few times, but not the guys. I don't see them all day at school.



AS I APPROACH THE DINER I SEE DANTE'S CAR IN THE LOT. I HAVE A MOMENT of indecision. Should I still go in, or just head home? I could ask Dante if he found my keys. I only have the spare set now, and if something should happen to them I'd really be in trouble.

The question is answered for me when he opens the door, and all three guys trail out, never looking in my direction. I slow my pace and wait for them to enter the car and pull from the lot before I head into the mostly empty restaurant. Maggie looks up with a slight frown. "You just missed the boys." Her eyes dart behind me to the parking lot.

"Oh, I saw them, they were headed out when I walked up." I drop my jerry-rigged backpack to the floor and take a seat at the bar away from the other customers.

Maggie's brow furrows. "I think they were going to find *you*."

I scratch the side of my nose, "Why?"

She gives an exaggerated eye roll. “Something about Ares interrupting you guys’ study date yesterday. Sometimes I think that boy really took that name his momma gave him to heart.”

“That’s Dante’s brother, right?” I realize I just stumbled onto a goldmine. Maggie probably has more information than the guys would ever divulge.

Maggie leans forward on the counter, dropping her elbows with a sigh. “Yes, you’d think those boys hated each other with how much they argue and fight.” She shakes her head slowly.

“Do they?” I question when she doesn’t say anything else.

“Course not.” She stands back looking affronted. “All four of them boys grew up together. Ares is the oldest, so he always took on all the responsibility for them. Only thing is, you can’t be the loving big brother and the father figure too. Sometimes they’re bound to bump heads. Now that the boys are older, and Ares is coming home, I’d assume things will get righted real quick.” She looks at me then with a strange gleam in her eye.

“You know I recognized you the moment you walked through the door.” Her grin is smug. I stiffen, recognized me from where? Maggie continues, not noticing my discomfort. “I know a hard worker when I see ’em.” I blow out a deep breath before placing my hands on the counter.

“Speaking of working, do you need any help here today or tomorrow?” I swivel on the stool watching her as she grabs a towel to wipe down the bar.

She eyes me from the side. “You can’t work seven days a week and go to school, I won’t hear of it. Now, how’s about a piece of pie? Gus just made up an apple pie that I’ve been dying for any excuse to cut into.” Maggie drops the towel and heads to the back through the double doors without waiting for an answer.



THE PIE IS DELICIOUS AS PROMISED. BUT I CAN’T LET GO OF ALL THE WORRIES hanging over my head. So, I end up smearing most of it around my plate instead of eating it.

I wave goodbye to Maggie soon after. She was happy to let me sit at the counter and hangout, but I don’t need to be there taking up her time if she won’t let me help out.

I finger the key in my pocket, knowing I’ll need to see about getting

another set. The keys I lost had the door key along with the ignition key. The door key should be easy enough to replace, I hope I don't have any trouble getting the other key made, it's older and doesn't have any fancy chip in it or anything, so I think I should be okay.

I spot a car parked alongside of the road near the entrance of Turtle Creek. As I get closer I can see three silhouettes leaning on the hood. My footsteps falter, what are they doing here? I've been sitting at the diner for over an hour, have they been here the whole time? What if my mom saw them waiting for me? Ollie doesn't know she's not around. He's the only one I told that she was sick, so I can't really be mad at all of them. But I still feel like I want to yell at them for it. I know my frustration has more to do with yesterday than about them waiting for me, but I don't care.

Milo turns first, the sound of my shoes on the gravel alerting him I'm nearing. "Hey," he blurts, and the others turn too.

"What are you guys doing?" There's a bite to my words I can't keep out. Dante's head turns, and he looks over at Ollie. Expecting him to talk for the group, *again*. I cross my arms over my chest and glare at him. "I told you my mom was sick." He swallows quickly.

"I know, we weren't planning on knocking on the door or anything, we were just waiting to see you. I thought we'd catch you coming from school." Ollie stands then pushes the loose strands of hair, which escaped his hair tie, back.

I narrow my eyes still waiting for an answer to my question as to why they're here. Milo steps forward, taking a quick peek over at Ollie, who blows out a breath and tilts his head. "We were wondering if maybe we could talk... about yesterday." Milo seems unsure for the first time since I've met him. He's always been a little aloof, but I've never known him to mince words. If anything, he's always been the most direct of the three of them.

"About what? How you guys punked me and I fell for it? No thank you. I get it, haze the new girl. It's not even all that original. You think you're the first people to give me a hard time, with as much as I've moved? This isn't even a blip on the radar." I stare then up and down.

"We aren't punking you Laura. I think you know that. How could we fake what you're feeling? You asked me if I felt it too, remember?" Dante asks softly.

I purse my lips, sure I remember, but it doesn't mean any of it was real. I roll my eyes upward and shake my head. "I really don't have the energy to

argue with you guys. Why don't you just tell me what you want so we can move this along?"

"I... we were hoping to talk." Ollie looks around the deserted road. "Do you want to grab a bite to eat, or we could go back to Dante's house. I know we can't disturb your mom and standing on the side of the road is kinda strange, even for us. I promise it won't go like yesterday." He rushes out the last bit, looking between his two friends.

"Yeah, no interruptions. Just answers," Dante adds.

TWELVE

*M*y mind is warring with indecision. Yes, I still want to know what these boys think they know about me. But, I'm consumed with worry for my mom. Should I let myself be distracted by them? I glance past the Turtle Creek sign, my camper is too far away to see, but I need to check and see if my mom is home before I go.

"Laura?" Ollie questions.

"I'm thinking, okay?" Ollie nods briskly, taking a step backward and dropping his rear on the car to sit. A picture of patience. I make my decision. "I'm going to check on my mom *first*. If everything is okay, I'll come back out, and we can talk." I tip my head and stare between the three of them. I need them to see how serious I am about the next part. "If I'm not back out in... say five minutes, that means I can't go. That my mom needs me and that comes first."

Milo steps forward. "What's wrong with your mom?"

I shake my head in denial "I'm not talking about this right now. Are you guys going to wait, or you will just go now?"

"We'll wait," Milo mumbles and looks at the ground.

"Promise you won't knock on the door if I don't come back?"

Dante tightens his fists. "I don't like this. Why won't you let us near your house, are you afraid of someone, of something?"

I throw my hands out wide. "Take it or leave it."

Dante grumbles, turning partially away from me, and Milo places his hand on his shoulder in support. In the next instant Dante is striding toward me. I take two steps back before he grabs my wrist, slamming a cell phone into my open palm. "You don't come out in five minutes, I get a call telling

me you're okay. If not, I won't knock, but I'll be in that RV." He leans in even closer and I swear the color of his eyes shifts from a honey brown to a molten gold. "Take it or leave it," he snarls quietly.

I close my fingers over the phone and peer over his shoulder. My eyes are probably about ready to bug out of my head. I swallow once and give a terse nod.

Pulling free from Dante's grasp, I look at the phone. The sleek screen is lit, showing a picture of the black Nova. This is Dante's phone. "It's locked," I murmur.

Dante takes the phone from my hand with gentle fingers, his jaw is clenched tight with the effort. The picture changes to the home screen the second it's in his hand. With a few quick swipes he turns the lock feature off. He reaches out to hand the phone back, only to pull his arm away when I move to grab it. Dante turns to look at Ollie and Milo, who have been completely quiet through the exchange. "Shit," he curses. Dante grabs my hand, flipping it over so my palm is exposed. He studies my eyes intensely. "Anything you see on this phone was from before we met you."

My nose wrinkles. "What do you mean?"

Dante's eyes close on a long blink. "Nothing, just that...." He looks over at Ollie. "Can I do a master reset? How long will that take?" I close my fingers over the phone in question. Before he said anything I never once thought to look through his phone, I mean people's whole lives are on their phones nowadays. But now my curiosity is piqued. What is he worried I'd find?

"I won't go through your phone," I promise. I might want to, but that would be a huge violation of his privacy.

Dante looks at the ground. "I believe you," he mumbles but glances away, his shoulders slumped. What's that about?

I reach up and place my hand on his shoulder. "Your secrets are safe with me. I promise I won't touch your phone unless I'm using it to call you guys."

"I would." Dante's eyes meet mine. "I would go through yours if I had the chance. I wouldn't be able to stop myself, hell I wouldn't even try." He spins away from me, heading toward the other end of the car. Ollie approaches with a small grim smile.

"Okay, so me and Milo both have our cells, we're under the contacts. If you're not going to come back out, just ring one of us to let us know." I nod biting my lip.

Without looking at Dante, I slide the phone in my back pocket. It feels warm and foreign, but also comforting. I've never had a cell phone. Not even the burner kind the kids at school would get if their parents took theirs away.

I trek past the front entrance, grateful they parked far enough away where Mike wouldn't see them and ask questions.

Before I unlock the door, I know she's not in there, and she hasn't been back since she left. There's something about the stillness that makes loneliness invade. I take a good look around to see if anything has changed just in case before leaving a note on the dinette.

I pull the phone from my pocket, only to check the time. I'm afraid I didn't give myself enough time to make it back to the car before my time limit expires. I bite my lip then hit the contact button after locking the door behind me. There's a star with favorites listed under it. Ares is the first name listed, followed by Milo, and Oliver. The rest of the names are girls with Delaney being one of them. I huff out a breath and hit the green phone next to Ollie's name.

"Hello," Ollie answers briskly.

"It's me." I cringe at how silly I must sound.

"I know," he chuckles throatily. "Mom need ya?" He sounds a little defeated.

"No, I'm actually walking back, I was worried I would run out of time."

"Oh... good. Do you want us to pick you up at the entrance?"

"No," I answer too quickly. "I'll meet you where you were."

"Okaaay," he stretches the word.

"So, bye I guess."

"Wait, um... are you hungry? I'm famished, but I'm always hungry."

"Can't we just talk about this when I get to the car?"

"I just thought maybe we could stay on the phone until you get here." Ollie's voice is soft, like he doesn't want anyone to overhear him.

"I guess I'm a little hungry," I answer as I make it to the mouth of the park.

"Hey, there you are. I see you."

"I'm going to hang up now Ollie."

"Okay Laura, bye... no wait, see you soon." He chuckles on the line before it goes dead. I pull the phone from my ear as it vibrates. I look down on instinct. A text from Kimberly scrolls across the screen before I have a chance to look away.

Had a great time last night ! When can I see you again????

MY STOMACH HOLLOWS, AND I LET MY HAND DROP TO MY SIDE, WALKING THE rest of the way to the car. Dante couldn't give me answers yesterday, but he had time to kick it with Kimberly. I don't meet Dante's eyes when I place his phone on the hood of the car. I'm seconds away from saying fuck it, and going back home.

"Come on Laura, Milo called shotgun." Ollie tilts his head like he's disappointed, but I know it's just for show. "Ladies first," he adds, holding the seat forward for me to slide into the back. Dante is standing at the hood of the car staring down at his phone. I can't see what he's doing but I watch as his thumbs bounce around the screen. I look out the window, he's probably texting her back. I have no right to be jealous, but that doesn't stop the lump in my throat.

Once everyone is seated Dante sighs, "Where to?"

Milo looks back at me then Ollie. "Is Dante's place okay? I don't really feel like sitting in this car anymore." Milo's words aren't harsh, but I feel like he's chastising me anyway. I shrug, what's the difference. At least there I don't have to put up with running into someone from school. These guys seem to attract attention everywhere they go. I'm pretty surprised no one found them while they were waiting for me.

I shift in my seat. I didn't bring my backpack and I feel like something's missing. That thought spurs another. "Dante," my voice is small, I don't even want to address him. "Um, did you by chance find any keys yesterday? They were in my backpack, and when I got home I couldn't find them. I thought maybe they fell out when my bag broke?" I ramble.

Milo turns in his seat, facing me. "Good thing your mom was home to let you in."

I look out the window. "Yeah, good thing."

"I didn't see your keys, but I wasn't looking either." Dante looks over at Milo. "We had some stuff to deal with last night." *I just bet you did* I think to myself. "We can look for them today," Dante finishes.



THE DRIVE TO DANTE'S HOUSE ONLY TAKES ABOUT FIFTEEN MINUTES. AS soon as I spot his driveway, my stomach rolls. My knee bounces as we turn down the lane. Ollie reaches over and places his palm on my thigh, stilling my movements. He gives me a gentle squeeze and I look over at him. His lips open and he barely whispers, "It'll be okay." I don't really believe him. I mean he doesn't even know I'm dealing with so much more than this weirdness happening with us. But I plaster a smile on my face and nod, hoping he'll buy it.

When Dante shuts off the car no one moves to get out. For all of Milo's talk that he was tired of it, he doesn't rush to exit either. Dante turns in his seat, finding me in the back. "Probably should have told you yesterday, that's my brother's house over there." His head nods to the cheery yellow house with the wraparound porch.

"It's your house too Dante," Milo intones.

"I like my privacy. My brother's staff are always around over there so I moved into the loft a year or so ago."

"I thought your brother lived far away." Dante's eyes narrow. "I mean... Maggie mentioned he was moving back so I assumed he didn't live *here*." I wave my hand at the picturesque house to my right.

Dante turns back to the front. "Yeah he moved out a little over a year ago." It's not lost on me that the two time frames are very close together. Could there be more to why Ares moved out, or why Dante isn't staying in the house anymore? He opens his door and leans the seat forward for me. Bracing my arm on the driver's seat, I let my left leg find the ground. Dante doesn't move away so I have to shimmy past him to get out. Once I back away from him I rub my hands over my hips, straightening my t-shirt.

Why does their presence affect me so much? Half the time I can't figure out if Milo and Dante hate me or not. Ollie seems to be the only one who does more than tolerate me. It's him that wraps his arm around my neck and guides me to the stairway.

Dante heads right for the fridge, pulling out three cans of cola, before snagging another. He doesn't ask if anyone wants a drink, he just hands them out, stopping on me last. I don't drink much soda, but I take the offered can anyway. The sugar might actually do me good.

Not sure how to get things started, I look around the room. A few sheets of paper are still lying on the floor near the sofa. I place my drink on the kitchen counter and head over to clean up the mess I left and see if my keys

turn up. I drop to my knees much like yesterday, and lean down to get the piece half under the couch. As I pull it out something red catches my eye. On top of my paper is a tiny scrap of lacy red material that couldn't be anything but a pair of panties. Dante rounds the couch the second I pull the sheet out. I jerk my hand away, for those panties to have ended up on top of my paper, they would have had to have been left here after my bag broke yesterday afternoon. A bitter laugh escapes me.

"Well those aren't mine." I motion to the offending item. Dante is stock-still, his face is ashen, while his lips are rolled in. Milo walks over and peers over his friend's shoulder. His eyes go wide but he doesn't utter a word.

"Did you find someone else's keys?" Ollie questions, making his way over. "Those definitely aren't keys."

"Can you at least move them, so I can get my paper, I'm not touching them." I wave my hand over the panties, when Dante doesn't make a move to do anything with them.

Dante snaps out of his frozen posture and crosses his arms over his chest, widening his legs. "Are you sure they didn't fall out of your bag, I mean they're on top of your stuff."

I suck in a sharp breath. How dare he accuse me of leaving them here? "They aren't mine," I growl through gritted teeth and stand, unable to keep glaring at him from the floor. My fingers tremble, and my eyes prick with the sensation of brimming tears.

"You probably wouldn't admit to it if they were yours. Why would you have spare panties in your bag?" The implication is clear; he thinks I'm easy.

I take a step closer and point my finger at his chest. "I'll say it again since your small brain didn't understand me the first time. They are not mine. And if they were, it would be none of your fucking business why they were in my bag." Another step. "I'll have you know, you assuming ass, that there are plenty of reasons a girl might have a change of clothes with her that has nothing to do with what you're insinuating." I jab my finger into his sternum.

Dante's eyes narrow and he moves his head from left to right, cracking his neck. I'm breathing heavily and staring right back. I feel fingers wrap around my upper arms from behind. The static charge I get lifts the hair on my arms, and the baby hairs around my face fan out like I'm touching a plasma ball.

"Let's just take this down a notch," Milo mutters behind me. I twist my neck, surprised to find he's the one holding me. I jerk my shoulders and step

to the side, pulling free from his grasp. A gleam under the table catches my eye. I stoop and grab my keys from the floor, shoving them in my front pocket. My breathing is still choppy, but I don't feel like I grabbed an electric fence anymore. Ollie skirts the couch, stepping closer to me. I scan the three of them. Why did I come here? Desperation... loneliness?

"I think maybe I should go." I wrap my hands over my stomach looking at the ground. Milo's grunt of annoyance precedes him throwing his arms in the air.

"Can we drop all the drama for like five minutes and have a conversation?" He stares directly at me. My back goes rigid, and I drop my arms to my sides. He's blaming me for all this?

"Say whatever you need to say." I narrow my eyes on him. "Then leave me the hell alone." I separate myself from them by walking over to the wall and leaning against it.

"Not fucking possible," Milo utters under his breath.

"Oh, I assure you, it is," I snap back. Dante shakes his head and drops onto the sofa in a messy sprawl.

"Can we just rewind a few days?" Dante lifts his head off the back of the sofa, looking around. Milo drops down next to him and offers his knuckles for a fist bump. "Okay, so I'm going to go out on a limb and guess you don't know anything about our connection?"

I thin my lips and shake my head in denial. Dante nods his head in agreement. "Did you want to sit down, or... maybe your drink?" More avoidance. When I huff and roll my eyes, Dante continues, "I never expected we'd have to explain this to our Synergist. This isn't exactly easy for any of us either."

I rub my forehead, searching for patience. It would be easier if we could rewind a few days. Two days ago Dante was broody and quiet, but I didn't think he was the dick Ollie accused him of being. Milo's always been more standoffish, but not the way he's being now. What changed yesterday?

Deciding I want the answers they're promising, I walk over to the low table in front of the couch where I found my keys and sit, my legs folded in front of me with my hands in my lap. Ollie takes a seat next to Dante on the couch, while Milo chooses to move away from our group and lean against the small kitchen counter. I don't take it as a good sign.

"Is it bad that I wish Ares was here to do this?" Dante winces and looks over to Ollie. Who shakes his head no, and grimaces.

“It’s only going to get harder to control, we have to do this,” Milo states flatly.

Ollie places his hand on Dante’s shoulder in a show of support. “Start with our story,” he offers softly.

Dante drops his elbows to his knees and grabs his head in his hands. “That’s not any easier to explain.” He looks up and meets my eyes briefly. “You know she’s going to think we’re crazy, right?”

“Not after see sees it, feels it for real.” Ollie scoots forward on the seat. “So, you know Dante has a brother, Ares.” He looks at me waiting for a response. I nod. Their wariness is wearing off on me. “Our parents were close friends, so all four of us grew up more like brothers than friends. I can’t remember a time I wasn’t at one of their houses or they were at mine.” Ollie gets a small smile on his face while looking across the room. “Me and Milo are only children, it’s uncommon for a grouping to have more than one child, that’s part of the reason we form groups instead of pairs, there are way more males than females.” He shakes his head. “I’m getting ahead of myself. Where was I? Oh yeah, so we’ve known we were different than norms since pretty much forever. We get taught from an early age to keep the truth of ourselves hidden. I mean, it’s not hard until we manifest, there’s nothing to hide really, we just don’t advertise that we know things will be different for us.”

I bring my fingers up to my lips darting my eyes around the room. *Is he for real?* Ollie continues, “Typically, when we come of age,” he clears his throat, “we get a marker, like an identifier that links you to your grouping.”

I hold my hand up and close my eyes. “What kind of identifier?”

“It’s usually something small, something that looks like a birthmark,” Dante answers, leaning back on the couch, fiddling with the thick leather bracelet on his wrist. “So, most groups have two males and one female, there are a few that have three guys, but that’s not very common.

Ares got his mark before us, cause obviously he’s older. When your mark appears it’s a big deal, it gets...” He struggles for the word. “...registered?” He glances between Milo and Ollie.

Milo nods. “Yeah something like that.” His hands are braced on the counter behind him. It shows off how tapered his waist is, and the width of his shoulders. He’s staring off into space, so I take a few moments to study him. The distance and the fading sun conceals the blue of his eyes. His brow is drawn low, and shadows darken his features, making him look more

intimidating. His head snaps up and he meets my eyes, I look away immediately hating he caught me staring.

“Ares’s mark was presented, and no one came forward with a matching mark. That occasionally happens. Sometimes members of the group might not have manifested yet because they are younger by a year or two, but Ares went four years before anyone got the same identifier.”

“It was me,” Ollie pipes up. His chin rose with a challenge. “I was relieved. I already knew Ares, loved him like a brother so I knew we could work together as a team. But... it scared me too. Ares had manifested four years early and he still didn’t have a Synergist, that’s a long time to go without the core of your ability.”

Milo’s brisk movement startles me as he joins Ollie on the sofa. He sits down hip to hip with him, running his palm over Ollie’s back. “I was next, my birthday is just a few weeks after Ollie’s.” the two boys look at each other, a slight grin pulling a Milo’s lips, while Ollie just stares back with open affection. My earlier assumption is affirmed, they are definitely together.

“My mark showed up a few months later, but by that time we already suspected it would, we had always been really close, so it made sense in a weird way that we would all be in a group. There hasn’t been an Infinity with five in a really long time; it’s almost unheard of now.” Dante adds. “Ares was... he had been struggling, but now with all of us manifesting with the same mark, he got excited. Thinking that our Synergist would show herself at any moment.” Dante scoots forward on the couch, his eyes boring into mine. “That was almost two years ago.”

They seem so serious, there’s a small part of me that almost believes them, they’re so convincing. “Let’s pretend I believe you.” I raise my eyebrows in query. “What does any of it have to do with me?”

A man steps forward from the shadows in the corner of the room, a scream almost tears from my throat. “You’re who we’ve been waiting for. You are our Synergist.”

THIRTEEN

Dante jumps up and turns to face the man who just walked in out of nowhere. He must have been here the whole time—hiding in the bathroom? My brain struggles to explain his sudden appearance. I get on my knees, preparing to bolt at a moment's notice. The relative safety I'd felt with the guys evaporates when my eyes connect with the man in front of me. The shadows cling to him, casting doubt that's he's even really there. "Ares," Dante warns. "You said we had until tomorrow before you arrived." This is Ares? Holy shit! If I thought Dante had the bad boy thing down, he has nothing on his big brother.

Ares's eyes leave me for the first time since his appearance and shift to Dante. His hand lifts to cover his mouth, pinching his lips slightly, and then he pulls his palm, free sliding it down his neck. He rolls his head on his shoulders, before taking one menacing step toward his brother. *Run*, that's my first thought. Ares is dangerous in a way I can't describe.

Coming to my feet, I keep my movements small, I don't want to attract his focus again. I sidestep the table, making it slightly closer to the exit. I shouldn't be here.

"Six years." Ares doesn't yell, he doesn't even raise his voice. Dante drops his head, eyes cast to the floor. Milo and Ollie stand as a unit. I take a few steps closer to the stairs. "Where are you trying to disappear to *cara*?" I stiffen, he's not even looking in my direction, but I know he's talking to me.

My mouth goes dry when all four of them turn to eye me. I lick my lips. "I don't know what you guys think you're doing, but I'm not playing this game." One moment I'm standing alone a few feet from my escape, the next Ares is there right in front of me blocking my path. Instinctively I take a step

back, my head shakes in denial as my hands begin to tremble. No, that's not possible, no one can move that fast.

"Why have you been hiding from me?" His words are spoken softly, contrary to the anger simmering in his brown eyes. I look to the others for help, they don't move.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but my mom is expecting me home at any minute." It's a lie, one I hope he doesn't catch. Ares's hand reaches up and I flinch away. I feel a slight tug on the loose hair on the left side of my face. I open my eyes to find Ares staring at his fingers sliding down my hair. His lips part as he rubs his thumb and forefinger together once he reaches the end. I take another step back and my calves hit the table behind me.

Fingers intertwine with mine as Ollie steps up to my side. "You're scaring her," he accuses. Ares tilts his head and his eyes narrow on our joined hands. The tingle flares to life. I squeeze Ollie's hand tighter grateful for the support.

"I believe her," Dante mutters. "She doesn't know what we are." A spike of anger has me tensing.

"I don't care if any of you believe me or not. Frankly I'm not convinced you guys aren't trying to fuck with me."

"*Gattino* has a little bite," Ares challenges with one eyebrow raised. His eyes scan me, from my worn out sneakers to my miss matched eyes. The corner of his lip twitches in a barely noticeable fashion. Is he laughing at me? I bare my teeth in a sneer, he may be intimidating, but there's something about him that puts me on edge. Ares eyes go wide before he throws his head back and a laugh booms free. "Yes, a bite indeed." He slaps Ollie on his shoulder and turns away from us.

I deflate immediately. Feeling shaky, I don't protest when Ollie tugs me over to the sofa to sit. Dante tucks himself next to me, leaving a small gap for Milo to wedge into.

Ares walks back from the kitchen with a bottle of water tipped to his lips, watching us the whole time. Seeming satisfied with what he finds, his eyes take in the space around us. "So, this is where you've been hold up?" His mouth turns down in a frown. I look around noticing the sparse decorations and minimalistic amenities. It's roomier than I'm used to, but compared to the house across the driveway this must have less to offer. I eye the plush carpet and the fine leather couch, wondering what he finds lacking.

“Like you’re one to talk. We haven’t seen you in what, seven months? No, eight. It was Christmas, right?”

Ares uses the toe of his expensive looking black leather shoe to pull the leg of the table out a bit before sitting down facing us. He doesn’t meet Dante’s eyes when he responds, “I’ve been busy.”

That gets a snort from Dante. “Just don’t lecture me about hiding when I learned it from the shadow man himself.” His reply reminds me of how it seemed like Ares really did step out of the shadows. I shift in my seat looking for room to separate myself from the guys on either side of me, but there isn’t any.

“Let’s not waste time, our guest is getting restless.” Ares is using me as a distraction, everyone knows it, but it works anyway. I glance at him, noting the slight scruff of a beard and mustache on his face. His hair is black, styled away from his face. His eyes are a few shades darker than Dante’s, more tawny. He has on a white dress shirt cuffed at his forearms with a charcoal vest buttoned over top. My eyes snap up from Ares’s denim clad legs when a throat clears.

I sit up straight, unwilling to let him make me feel like I was leering. “Someone was about to tell me what the hell is going on here.”

“How about a compromise? I’ll tell you anything you want to know, but after you have to answer my questions.”

“Our questions,” Milo blurts over Ares.

“Our questions,” Ares confirms with a nod toward Milo.

I jerk my head up and down in acceptance. Looking around to find all four of them watching me. Ares waves his hand out, deferring to his brother. “By all means continue where you left off.” He’s being a smart ass.

Dante rolls his eyes. “So, we told you we’re different, but we didn’t really talk about how we’re different. I,” Dante places his hand over his chest, “am a shape-shifter.” The words are uttered slowly like that might help me understand his meaning. I immediately think of the encounter in art class where I thought I felt fur rub along my skin, but dismiss it almost as quickly.

Ollie speaks next. “I have some control over the elements.”

Without missing a beat Milo says, “I have an affinity for strength.” I roll my head on my neck to look over at Ares, wondering what crazy thing is going to come out of his mouth. They were right, I do think they’re nuts.

Ares’s eyes have a strange twinkle I don’t really understand. “I know you don’t believe us yet, but you will.” His smirk is a little evil as he lifts his

hand, extending it out to me. With a crook of his finger he beckons me forward. I lean in without reservation. My attention locked on him. "I'm a shadow caster." The pupils in his eyes expand until there's barely a thin ring of tawny brown visible. I can't look away. When I feel Dante's hand cover mine I gasp, the moment broken with his touch.

"Don't do that to her, it's not right. She can't withstand your pull yet," Dante warns, narrowing his eyes on his brother who doesn't look the least bit chastised. In fact he looks positively pleased. He gives a lazy shrug of indifference before leaning back on the table, propped up with his hands.

What was he doing to me, how was he doing it? A tremor of trepidation uncoils in my stomach. I swallow thickly, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth. "What were you doing to me?" Ollie's arm wraps over my shoulders, tucking me into his side.

"Laura, I know this must seem all kinds of fucked up, but we're trying to tell you that we are different. That you are like us, part of us actually."

I snort. "I have no illusions I have special powers, or that I'm part of some crazy group."

"An Infinity, you are the Synergist of our Infinity," Ares answers. I glare at him, wondering what his part is in all of this? I can see the guys' interest in making the new girls life hell, but he's not in high school. Why bother with the game?

"You guys get an A for effort." I hold both my thumbs up I mock excitement. "This probably would have worked better on someone more gullible, but I'm not buying any of this crap. You can tell everyone at school I believed you. That I was totally into your fairytale garbage, I don't even care. Tell me one thing though, why waste so much time? You guys must really be board to come up with all this just to fuck with me, or is this how you initiate everybody who moves here?" I roll my eyes.

"She's not going to believe us until we show her, and not just parlor tricks." Milo looks over at Ares. "So, who wants to do it?" He searches his friends' faces.

"My gift would probably be the most direct approach, but I think I would probably scare her too." Dante looks away from us toward the window.

"I can do it," Ollie offers. "She would probably find some way to explain away your strength Milo, and Ares... Sometimes yours is just freaky, even for us. So, I'll do it."

Ollie braces his hand on my thigh as he pushes up to stand. He walks

around the table Ares is perched on, stopping once he's about halfway to the TV hanging on the far wall. He rolls his shoulders a few times then turns to face us. His hands are hanging loosely by his sides as he blows out a deep breath. "All right, let's start with something small." Ollie widens his stance and brings his hands up with his palms facing the ceiling. In the blink of an eye his hands are engulfed in flames.

"Holy shit," Milo barks jumping up from the couch. He takes a few steps toward Ollie before shielding his face with his forearm. "Ollie shut it down, you're going to burn the house down."

Dante stands slowly disbelief etched in his face.

Ollie's eyes widen, his mouth falls open in shock. Shaking, he closes his fists, the flames don't all die, but the heat rolling off of him dissipates. "I... I haven't tried using my abilities since yesterday." He is still staring down at his clenched fists. "I was going for a small candle flame in each hand." His eyes lift to me.

I pull my feet up on the cushion beneath me, pushing myself up to climb over the back of the sofa. My heart pounds in my chest in a quick rhythm. Ollie looks at Dante before making a dash for the stairs. The door slams shut seconds later.

"Well that was certainly a show," Ares deadpans. He's the only one who doesn't seem worried about Ollie or what just happened to him. "I think your animal might have been a better option Dante..." He pauses, turning to look at me with narrowed eyes. "Or maybe not, who knows what effect she might have on you."

"That had nothing to do with me." My vision wavers like asphalt on a hot summer day and my legs feel like jello. My breath is coming in short gasping pants. Milo runs past me, Dante quick on his heels, both following Ollie out the door. Ares is still staring at me as he stands. He prowls toward me with graceful steps. Weakness invades my muscles before I begin to collapse and Ares catches me before I hit the ground.

My eyes blink open to find him gazing down at me. He brings his hand up to my neck, placing his palm over my throat as his fingers wrap around my neck. The tingles invade my skin, forcing me to gasp. His pupils grow, covering all the color of his eyes even further, turning the whites of his eyes black. I jerk back, frightened at the sight. His lids close, slowly covering the strangeness.

"Please don't be frightened of me," he whispers hoarsely, while his eyes

squint tightly. A soothing throb pulses from his hand, calming me immediately. Awareness of being held in his arms makes heat rise in my cheeks.

“Milo is with... Oliver,” Dante stutters coming up the stairs. I stiffen, half in Ares’s lap. “What happened?” he steps closer, kneeling next to his brother. I scramble from the floor, dislodging Ares’s arms. Brushing my hands down my shirt over my hips, I try to calm my thoughts. My brain is trying hard to reconcile what I think I just saw, to what my mind knows is possible. People can’t control fire, make it appear from nowhere, eyes don’t go black. I can’t explain any of it. But I can’t pretend I didn’t see any of it with my own eyes either. They think I’m somehow connected to them, that I have some ability? What will they do when they realize nothing could be further from the truth? I’m not special, in any way.

“Is Ollie okay?” I question, surprising myself. The two brothers rise. Standing next to each other as they are, it’s easy to see the familial resemblance. Dante is lighter, his hair, his features, even his demeanor are somehow lighter than his brothers. I turn, making my way over to the open space of the kitchen. I need to put some distance between us.

“He’ll be okay, he’s more worried he scared you than anything else,” Dante finally answers.

“It’s getting late.” I glance at one of the windows, noting the orange hue of the sky. It’s not like I really need to be at home, but I’m not sure my brain could handle another revelation at this point.

“It’s not that late... none of us have eaten yet, how about we find something to eat? I think there’s a lot we still need to talk about.” I glance over my shoulder at Dante, he’s still standing near his brother and he has adopted an unassuming posture; his hands are shoved deep in his pockets with his shoulders rounded down.

Ares, on the other hand, has his arms crossed over his chest with his feet spread far apart. “He’s right. Shadow travel always leaves me famished.” His eyes run over the few cabinets on the wall and small fridge. “Let’s go over to the main house and see if Gloria is still there to throw something together for us.”

Dante pinches the back of his neck. “She’s not there. I told her I had plans tonight, to take off early.”

Ares pivots to look at his brother, a small grin forming on his lips. “Didn’t want any witnesses? I’m proud.”

Dante reaches out and swats him with the back of his palm, then jerks his head toward me. “It’s not like that Laura, not like he’s making it sound anyway. We just didn’t know how you were going to react. I can’t have the housekeeper calling the cops because a girl comes running out of my room screaming.”

“Wow... That doesn’t really make it sound any better, what were you planning on doing to me if I did have that kind of reaction?” I tap the toe of my sneaker on the floor, waiting for his reply. Playing it cool like this wasn’t exactly what I wanted to do.

The door downstairs opens and Milo’s head pops over the railing, his eyes on me, his lips pressed in a thin line. Ollie trudges up behind him with his head hung low.

“We were just talking about food, how about we order a pizza?” Dante offers in the awkward silence. It’s strange to see him taking on the role of peacemaker, since it’s usually Ollie. I shrug, knowing I probably won’t be able to eat much, if at all.

“Fine by me.” Milo mutters, walking over to the couch and dropping into the cushions. My eyes go to Ollie who’s fidgeting near the stairs, barely in the room.

I walk over hesitantly. Ducking my head, I peer up at him from below. “You okay Ollie?” My voice is small, unsure I should even be asking, but I can’t ignore the way he looks so sad. His eyes find mine and he searches my face before he blows out a heavy breath, nodding.

FOURTEEN

“*I*’ll order the pizza, I have a few calls to make since I left rather unexpectedly. Does anyone have any requests?” He looks directly at me while asking. I give a noncommittal shrug. Ares tromps down the stairs with his phone already at his ear.

Dante sighs. “Might as well have a seat, it’ll be a little while.”

I hover near the kitchen area while Ollie makes his way over to Milo and Dante on the sofa. There’s no way I’m wedging myself in with them. Dante points the remote at the TV and the screen flares to life with several selections available. He clicks on a recorded option and selects *Big Bang Theory*. The volume is down low, but it breaks up the silence.

“Come sit Laura,” Ollie offers. I shuffle over, folding my legs to sit on the carpet, my body turned enough where I can see the television and the guys out of the corner of my eye. Ollie lifts up from the couch slowly and he crosses the few steps separating us. “This okay? Can I sit?” I bob my head on a nod. “I didn’t mean to scare you,” he adds the moment he sits down. I know that, there’s a lot of things I’m confused about, but that’s not one of them. I can tell by his reaction it upset him.

“I know Ollie.”

“I’ve never had that much power before. I didn’t expect that,” he confesses, his eyes on the TV. Milo and Dante start up a hushed conversation behind us. It gives me the impression they’re trying to give us a moment alone.

“Ollie.” He looks over at me his eyes searching mine. “I’m not the person you guys are looking for. I don’t have any powers.” I look down, almost disappointed I’m not. His fingertip lifts my chin so I’m staring right back into

his eyes.

“Oh Laura, if that were true then what happened earlier wouldn’t have been possible. Our connection is growing faster than I’d imagined.” Ollie drops his hand from my face. “You must have a ton of questions, I know I want to ask you a bunch of stuff.”

“I do have questions, like how is it possible that superheroes are walking around, and nobody knows? How many of you are there? Does everyone in your family have abilities? Did it hurt when your hands went all... fiery?” I rush out, my cheeks flushed.

Ollie’s eyes squint and his lips turn up in a smirk as he holds up his hands ticking off his fingers while he answers me. “You’d be surprised what people will ignore just so they can go on believing what they’ve always been told is true.” Next finger. “More than a few, less than a lot.” Third finger. “For the most part, yes everyone in our families has abilities.” Fourth. “What was the last question? Oh yeah. Did it hurt?” He leans in a little closer and whispers, “Not even a little. It felt amazing actually, like taking a deep breath after being underwater.” His eyes are shiny with excitement.

A slow smile pulls at my lips, his exuberance contagious. Reality crashes into me seconds later. No matter how much I would like to be what they’ve been waiting for, I’m not. My grin slips. “It’s not me. I’m not what you think. I’m just a girl, a normal girl. I don’t have super powers.”

“You will,” Dante supplies from the couch. I turn to face him, noting the he and Milo have given up the illusion of not listening to our conversation.

“When and how will I get these *powers*?” I’m incredulous. It’s one thing to make me believe that they have abilities when I can see them with my own eyes, but to convince me I possess them too?

“The when, is a difficult question to answer,” Milo intones. “There hasn’t been an Infinity with five, in a very long time, maybe ever. Plus, we need to know why, or how it is you aren’t registered in our community.”

“You’ve said your mom is sick, right? What about your dad?” Dante leans forward, his elbows braced on his knees.

“My dad died when I was little, two or three. I don’t really remember him, and my mom doesn’t really like talking about him.” Ignoring the TV, I turn to face Dante and Milo.

“I don’t have a mark, a what did you guys call it... indent?”

“Identifier,” Milo corrects me.

“Well I don’t have an identifier.”

“Are you sure? You might not even know, it could look like a birth mark.” Dante grabs the thick leather band on his wrist, spinning it.

I wrinkle my nose, thinking of anything that could be what they’re referring to. “I don’t think so. I don’t even have a birthmark.” I tell them finally.

“This would have showed up around the time you turned sixteen.” Ollie’s eyebrow rises in question. I shake my head in refusal. “You have to have the mark Laura, we can feel you’re connected to us.”

“What if you’re wrong? I’m trying to tell you guys. I’m not some super-secret squirrel. You said that this runs in families, right? So, wouldn’t my mom know something like this about me?” My response is clipped. I’m tired of trying to convince them that I’m not in their *Infinity* group or whatever.

“Do you remember the first time you touched one of us?” Ollie questions as he pushes one fist into the other, cracking his knuckles. “It felt strange, kinda like an electric charge?”

That I can agree with, touching them is a completely different experience. I look down at my hands, rubbing my thumb over my fingernails. “That’s what you’re basing all this on, that I get a tingle when you guys touch me? That probably has more to do with how sheltered I’ve been than me having abilities. It’s called biology, hormones and pheromones. Attraction,” I add, heat rising in my cheeks.

Dante chuckles and lets his back hit the couch. “While I can admit there’s definitely some major attraction going on,” his eyes track over me lazily, “the tingles, as you call them, are part of the Infinity. It’s part of the process, a hundred years ago they didn’t have a computer database with all the markers cataloged so you can find your grouping. You had to have a way to know if you met your matches. It wasn’t considered polite to strip naked every time you met someone new to compare identifiers.”

“We can try that route though, I’m more than willing to forgo the niceties. The floor is yours,” Ares chimes in. He moves just like the shadows, silent and stealthy. I didn’t hear him enter or come up the stairs. He’s holding four pizza boxes aloft in one hand, with a six-pack of brown glass bottles in the other. Everyone ignores his comment as the guys rise. Our conversation stops in its tracks by his interruption, or the smell of food alone. I think it’s the latter when they all converge on the boxes like hungry wolves.

I have to admit, the smell is divine. For the first time in days I’m actually hungry. Milo opens a cabinet next to the fridge, pulling down a stack of

plates. Sliding my hands in my back pockets, I rock on my toes with uncertainty.

Ares grabs the first plate in the stack and lifts the lid of every box, placing a slice from each on the dish. Expecting him to take a seat on the couch, I'm surprised when he bypasses it and instead heads straight in my direction. Ares extends the full plate to me. When I make no move to take it from him he clasps my hand, lifting it to the dish. "I wasn't sure what you like so I just guessed." I look down at the variety and my stomach growls. He releases my hand and steps back, leaving me with the pizza.

"Thank you," I mutter, lowering myself to the floor and folding my legs beneath me. I examine each square slice, deciding on the Hawaiian. Groaning the moment I take the first bite. It's amazing, the crust is crunchy and thick with buttery goodness coating my fingers. The pineapple is sweet and the ham is salty, providing the most perfect flavor combination.

Looking up I find Dante and Milo on opposite ends of the sofa, while Ares is perched on the arm next to Dante. Ollie comes back to sit next to me on the floor. His dish is filled in much the same way mine is. "S'good?" he nods around a mouth full.

I dust my hands together, spreading the grease without meaning to. "It is. I love deep dish." We eat in relative quiet; someone has turned the volume of the television up a few notches providing necessary background noise.

I try each slice, deciding Hawaiian is definitely my favorite, but the bacon and pepperoni is a close second. I'm stuff with two almost full pieces remaining. The guys have taken turns getting up to restock their plates more than once.

With my plate balanced in my lap I lean back on my hands. My thoughts continue to circle with the images of Ollie's hands on fire—they look absolutely normal now, I've checked—and Ares's eyes going black. I think about all the movies and books I've read where that happens, and the person is a demon or monster. My eyes dart to the sophisticated man balanced on the arm of the couch and I can't reconcile the two. He just went and got us pizza, and served it to me, how evil could he be?

Dante catches my attention, when he leans over and tugs the phone from his front pocket. He looks at the screen then tosses the thing on the table like it offended him. Milo leans forward to peer at it with interest. I glance back at the TV as Ollie erupts in a fit of laughter, the canned response from the show echoes along with him.

“SINCE I WAS LEFT OUT OF THE REVELATION THAT YOU GUYS FOUND OUR Synergist—or she found you—why don’t you catch me up on why I was kept in the dark?” Ares folds himself onto the sofa, straightening the cuffs of his white dress shirt. He’s not looking at anyone, but I can tell by his tone he’s not all that happy about the situation. Ollie looks over his shoulder at Ares, then shifts his body to face the trio behind us.

“We wanted to be sure before we told you. Most of us gave up on ever finding our match.” Ollie’s eyes glance at Milo, who shifts in his seat. “But things got complicated.” Now his eyes find me. “Laura wasn’t raised like us, she knows nothing about any of this. We told you yesterday to come home because we thought we had found her—”

“No,” Ares cuts him off. “I called Dante. You only told me yesterday because I already knew something was up.” His voice is hard, his posture rigid.

“We were going to tell you Ares,” Dante growls. “It’s not like we would keep something like this from you.”

“But you did. How long have you suspected she was our match?”

Dante looks away before reluctantly responding, “A week, maybe a little longer.” Ares, who had been looking out into nothing, snaps his head to the left, examining his brother. The blackness of his pupil expands, covering his eyes. “I wasn’t sure at first, she was standoffish. I didn’t know what to think. It didn’t take long to figure out she was clueless.”

“Hey,” I interrupt him. “I’m not clueless, and stop talking about me like I’m not sitting right here.” I lift my arms in a ‘what the fuck’ pose.

“No, not like... I mean you didn’t know about us. See?” He motions to me with his hand, looking at Ares, as if to say ‘see what I’m dealing with?’ “We started trying to spend time with her to figure out what was going on, but then we made the stupid mistake of actually touching her.” Dante snorts. “Milo’s been a grade a dick for the past few days, Oliver is floating around like he’s high on life, and I have shit I’m dealing with too.” He lets his head fall back on the sofa with a thump and stares up at the ceiling. “I was trying to make things easier on everyone, but it was obviously a fail. You’re pissed, Laura doesn’t believe half of it, and these two...” He shakes his head, not finishing.

Ares stands, moving behind the couch to pace. “You should have told me

right away.” His scorn isn’t just for Dante; he gives each of the guys a poignant look. “I get why you might not have been making the most rational choices, but I should have been included.” He stops abruptly and turns so his back is toward me, and his shoulders rise and fall slowly as he lets out a long exhale. “Let’s just move forward.”

I shake my head. “You guys still don’t get it, arguing about this is pointless. I am not your centergist or whatever.”

“Synergist,” Ares corrects. “You are. Of that I have no doubt.”

There’s nothing I can do to convince them. “Prove it,” I challenge, completely suspicious. Ares takes a few steps in my direction and I hold up my hand up to ward him off. “No funny stuff, none of that mind mumbo jumbo.”

The corner of his mouth lifts before he nods his head in mock seriousness. “I would never dream of using my mumbo jumbo on you.”

Ollie sits up straight next to me. “What are you going to do?” He’s looking back and forth between Ares and me.

“I’m going to show her my identifier,” Ares watches me from under his brow, how he perfected this look while standing above me is a thought another time before continuing in a low and sultry voice, “and I’m going to find hers.”

I cast my eyes around, unsure where to look as Ares lowers himself to his knees in front of me. Slowly, he brings his hands up to the fitted vest over his chest and slides the top button open.

I swallow. “Uh, wh... what are you doing?” I glance back at his hands, there is only one button left.

“You wanted proof.” There’s a glint in his tawny eyes, the pupil, while large, doesn’t hide the smoldering gleam. Did I ask for this? The vest is left open as he tugs the bottom of his shirt free from his belted jeans. How far is he going to go? Using his right hand, he lifts his shirt, gathering the material and holding it up so his lower stomach is exposed. His belly button has a trail of dark hair leading down to his pants. My mouth goes dry and my eyes flash up to his. I expected to see him smiling, but instead his eyes are on my lips, no grin in sight.

“You know I could show her mine, right?” Dante mutters from the couch.

“You’ve had days to show her, it’s my turn,” Ares answers without looking away. His left shoulder lifts and he bites his lip. I’m so tempted to look down when his eyes lower, then rise back to mine in invitation. More

shifting, and I lose the battle not to look.

Ares's left thumb is hooked in the waistband of his jeans pushing them down. The swirls of a dark mark are just visible near his hip. As soon as it's partially exposed, my breath leaves me in a huff. There's something familiar about it. My fingers lift without consent. Before I realize it, I'm touching his warm skin. Tracing what I can only describe as a Rorschach inkblot.

A low groan reaches my ears and I jerk my hand back. "I'm so sorry, I ..." My voice fades off. I don't even have an excuse to offer. My ears feel hot and I can't look at any of them.

"Well that went about how I expected," Milo announces, embarrassing me further. I tuck my hands in my lap and drop my head. "That's probably enough show and tell for tonight," he suggests.

"I'm not sure we should do group show and tell for a while," Ollie's voice sounds off, deeper than usual. I'm tempted to look over at him, but I can't bring myself to do it.

Ares knee walks, closing the small distance between us. I feel his fingers glide across the right side of my jaw, trailing up to my ear. A warm flush follows his touch. He tilts my face up. "It's a compulsion," he murmurs, "not something you can help *cara*."

As his words register, I whisper back, still staring up at him, "I thought we agreed no mind melting?"

"That wasn't me compelling you. I have no control over the Infinity. That was your proof." Ares stands, removing his hand from my face, and places it under my elbow. "I'm tired of her sitting on the floor. This room has served its purpose, but I'm back now so let's go home." Ares doesn't wait for a response from anyone. He leads me over to the stairs with a gentle pat on my back to descend. I look around, seeing if the guys are following along as easily as I am. Sure enough, they're all tagging along, leaving the open pizza boxes and all.

The sun has set, leaving a slight chill in the air. I fold my arms over my chest and tuck my hands into my sides. Milo jogs ahead opening a gate in the black fence surrounding the pool. Ares leads us to one of the French doors at the rear of the house. The door slides open freely, unlocked. I'm the last to enter.

The room is dim; three pendulum lights hang down from the ceiling illuminating a large, rectangular island a few feet in front of me. There are four wooden stools tucked under one of the longer sides. Dante steps up to a

panel of wall switches flicking up one as he passes by. Under and above cabinet lights flare to life, casting the room in a warm glow.

The kitchen forms a U around the Island, with the sink and dishwasher on one short side, refrigerator on the other. Opposite the stools is a six-burner stove and all the spare space is lined with ivory cabinets. There's a closed door tucked away next to the stove. The floors are maple colored wood, and shiny enough to eat off of.

I watch as the guys head to the right, stepping down two steps into a sunken family room. Two long sofas face each other. Against the far wall there's an empty fireplace with a couple chairs turned into it at one end. It's cozy with unlit candles and knickknacks dotting the tables and shelves.

Milo sinks into one of the couches, repositioning some of pillows. Ollie drops down on the other end and kicks his feet up, he doesn't even bother removing his shoes, just leaves them hanging off the edge.

"Laura, have a seat, get comfortable," Dante offers with a wave of his hand. I go to the corner of the unused sofa and sit. I shift a few times, barely sitting on the edge of the cushion before I give up and scoot all the way back. Immediately the pillows and cushions engulf me. I watch Ares as he slinks past and sits near me in the middle of the couch. I tip a bit as his weight lands. Dante is last to join us and he takes the last corner.

Seconds tick past in silence. Ollie is completely comfortable, his eyes are closed and his hands rest over his stomach. Milo is staring at his phone, his thumbs flying over the screen. Ares leans in close to me, his voice hushed, "Are they always like this?"

I bite my lip and nod. Half the time I'm around them is filled with awkward silence, the other with my wondering what the hell I'm doing with them. "You should've seen the first time they asked me to hangout. I just got done with a shift at the diner, they asked if I wanted to stay and eat. I said yes." I wave my hand dismissively. "It was a fluke, I didn't feel like going home yet. They just sat and stared at me a bunch. I thought I had food on my face." A laugh bursts free from Ares as he scans the others, who all seemed to be engrossed in something other than us.

"Tell me more." Ares turns to face me putting his elbow on the back of the cushion.

"Like what?"

He shrugs. "What else have you guys gotten up to?" Ares's eyes flick down to my mouth then back up.

Happy to have a distraction I decide to vent all the strangeness from the guys. I peek at Dante first. He's rubbing his hands up and down his thighs. "Dante told his girlfriend I asked for his help in art, and now she, and all her friends hate me," I blurt before I change my mind.

Dante leans his head past Ares to look at me. "I did not." He sounds like I just accused him of kicking a kitten.

"She told me Dante." I can't believe I'm actually still kinda mad about it. He stands when I roll my eyes and his mouth drops open like he's going to argue. "Milo, he was nice to me at first, but now he's a jerk most of the time. I mean, I might have flirted with Ollie a little bit," I push my fingers close together, "but that was before I knew they were boyfriends. And to be honest, I didn't even realize I was doing it, until he started getting mad."

Ares's eyes go wide, and he covers his smile with his hand. I chance a look in Milo's direction. His phone is in his lap, like he might have dropped it. His face a little pale. "And Ollie flirts with me all the time, right in front of Milo." Getting the courage, I slant my eyes in his direction. "You shouldn't do that Ollie, it's not fair to Milo." Next, I meet Dante's stare. "And you... Delaney is not nice, she's like every mean girl rolled into one, but you shouldn't treat her like you do either. You act like she's your stalker, not your girlfriend."

Ares leans his head back and shakes it slowly, his eyes still blown wide. "What in the actual fuck have you guys been doing here?" His tone is edged with humor, and a little incredulousness.

"Ares shut up," Dante barks, taking a few steps in my direction. His face is hard as he points a finger in my direction. I sink back into the couch. Ares reaches up and puts his palm over Dante's chest, stopping his approach. Dante looks down at his brother, then his eyes dart back to me. His shoulders drop slightly. "Delaney is not my girlfriend. I'm doing the artwork for the school yearbook. She's the head of the committee. I have to work on it after school to get the extra credit."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I just thought... wait, she told me she was your girlfriend!" I begin to apologize, then remember her confronting me in the hallway.

"Well that was obviously a load of bullshit. I didn't tell her Mr. Adams asked me to help you either." Dante huffs before dropping back onto the sofa. Is he mad at me? He's not looking in my direction, so I can't see his face.

Across from me Milo clears his throat. "Oliver and I... we..." He turns to

look over at Ollie, his shoulders rise as his eyes widen. “We... um...” Milo continues to stammer, running his hand through his hair.

“We’re really close, in a lot of ways. But we aren’t together in that sense really,” Ollie interjects. He never even bothers to look up; he’s still completely relaxed. Milo nods his head to confirm Ollie’s statement. He looks the opposite of relaxed. His hands are jerky as he brushes imaginary lint from his shirt.

My face heats, I’ve obviously made a rash judgment, and I’ve embarrassed myself and Milo. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth as I try to form an apology. Ares drops his palm heavily on my thigh, above my knee. I look over at him, my eyes search his for the right words. He winks at me, the only sign of encouragement I get.

I stand, feeling all kinds of awkward. Tangling my fingers together I approach Milo, “I’m sorry for making an assumption.” Ollie deserves an apology too, but this one is for him. “I’ve never really had very many friends. I’m not trying to use my ignorance as an excuse, I shouldn’t have done that, sorry.” Milo looks up, his lips in a thin line as he attempts a false smile.

Ollie swings his legs over to the floor and leans into Milo’s side, wrapping his arm over his neck. “He’s not mad at you Laura. He’s mad that through all of this, none of us have made our intentions clear.” My brow furrows.

“What intentions?” I question as Milo jabs his elbow into Ollie’s side, causing him to fold back and grunt.

“Easy bro,” Ollie pants through his teeth.

Milo’s eyes go wide. “Shit, man I’m sorry.” He stands, backing away from me and the couch. “I wasn’t trying to exert. Are you okay?”

Ollie unfolds on a slight wince. “I’m good, we all probably need to focus on not using our abilities for a little while, a least until we get a handle on the extra boost.”

“That was my fault. You hurt him because I was standing close to you?” I’m the one backing away now. I don’t think I truly believe I’m somehow enhancing their abilities, but I can’t stand the thought I might be the catalyst for them hurting each other either. First Ollie with the fire, now Milo. “I think you guys need to tell me what’s happening. If I’m the one causing this then I need to figure out how to make it stop.”

Ares sits forward on the sofa, resting his elbows on his knees, his eyes tracking my movement. “That’s the last thing we want to do.” My mouth

pops open to argue with him and Ares raises his hand. “I just mean the making it stop part, we will explain what’s going on.” I deflate, the fight leaving me. He pats the spot I was sitting in, inviting me to return. I look at Milo who is standing near the fireplace shaking out his hands.

Slowly, I make my way back. Keeping as much distance between Ollie and myself as possible. I feel like he might catch fire if I get too close, it’s not reasonable because we were sitting together on the floor earlier, but still I do it.

Ares places his hand on my thigh again, his fingers curl slightly above my knee with a gentle squeeze. Like he knows I’m afraid of triggering them. I narrow my eyes at him. “Can you read my thoughts?” It’s not the first time I’ve questioned their uncanny sense of me. Ares doesn’t answer me, but he does have a dark grin curling his lips.

Knowing that’s the only answer I’m going to get, I push on. “So, tell me about the Infinity, what *exactly* is it? And how am I involved?”

FIFTEEN

*M*y question is met with silence. I look at all four of them, wondering if they ever plan on telling me anything. Ares sighs. “Can’t expect boys to do a man’s job.” The others ignore the little dig as he continues. “I’ll start with the basics, considering these guys’ track record with you involving information. An Infinity is usually made up of two men, and one woman. There are a very few that have three men and one woman, we however have four to one.”

“How do you know?” I interrupt.

“Know what?” Ares drops his head back on the sofa, he’s already exacerbated and it’s just my first question.

“Know that there is only one girl, woman. I mean there are four of you, so could that mean there is more than one woman?”

Ares tilts his head, studying my face. “No, I’m confident there is only one.”

“How?”

Dante scrubs his hand over his face. I feel a slight pang of exclusion. They already have these answers, they grew up knowing their lives would change irrevocably at some point. I know nothing. Hell, I still don’t know if I believe them. I pinch my lips together and look down.

I feel the couch shift. “I’m confident there is only you, because I feel it. I know you won’t understand it yet, but I think at some point you will.” Ares tilts my face up, so I can see the patience in his eyes. I nod and wait for him to continue. “Where was I?” he mumbles under his breath. “Ah yes, so we,” he makes a circle with his hands encompassing Milo, Dante, and Ollie, “are like the reactants, and you are the catalyst, or Synergist as we call it. We each

have an ability as you've witnessed a little of. When you were introduced into the equation our abilities are amplified. Hence Ollie sparking up. When you first came into contact with one, or all of us, there was a reaction. Tingling you said, if I remember." Ares pauses, waiting for my reaction. I nod my head, biting my lip. How much of our earlier conversation did he hear?

"That tingling is like a warning system. It's a way for us to know we've encountered a match."

"Do you guys feel it too? When you touch?"

A slight pink rises on Milo's cheeks. "Not like it was when we touched you."

Hesitantly, I brush my fingers over Ares forearm and down to the top of his hand, trailing past his fingers, eventually folding my hands together in my lap. When I look up, he's staring at the hand I just grazed. "It's not there anymore." My words are spoken softly, I knew it was too good to be true.

Ollie comes over and sits on the arm of the couch, he places his hand over mine. "It's changing," he offers. "You may not believe much of this, but your body has already accepted it. That's the only way you would have been able to feed my power." I still feel something when he touches me, I felt the same thing when I touched Ares, but it's not the overwhelming feeling that would invade my senses from before, now that I'm thinking about it. I haven't felt it since the first day I came here, and they tried to explain what was happening.

"So, when you guys need your powers, like for something big, I'll have to be around?" I get a small jolt of satisfaction, knowing I might be needed. Ares gets up and heads to the kitchen, the light from the fridge opening creates a long shadow behind him. I narrow my eyes, wondering if the light is playing tricks on me, or if it is moving independently of him, which is the way it looks.

Dante grabs my attention by answering my question, "It's more than just when we're using our abilities for big stuff, it's more like we become a unit." He glances around to the others, waiting to see if he gave the right answer. When no one protests he continues, "We're able to function separately, but it's like losing one of your senses. If you are born without taste, eating is still something you would do. But say you tasted... chocolate once in your life, then you had to go back to not being able to experience the bitter sweetness melting on your tongue. Wouldn't you crave it? Crave it like you didn't know how to crave it before, because you had no idea there was something out

there that tasted like that?”

“So, that’s why you guys are so close. Wait, if Ares wasn’t living nearby wouldn’t that have been hard?”

The man in question drops into the seat next to me, closer if I had to judge. “We do get a certain connection from being together, but it’s not the same as the one we get from you.”

“That’s part of the reason I might have seemed like a jerk the last day or two,” Milo cuts in before I really have a chance to think about what Ares is implying. “Not all of us agreed that finding out how you don’t know about us, or yourself, was more important than having us all together.” He’s not looking at anyone in particular, he’s more addressing the room as a whole, but Dante accepts it as a challenge.

“You act like I was doing it to keep her away from you. It was a day or two max Milo.”

“Yeah a day or two, but I’ve been waiting for three years.” As soon as the words come out of his mouth he looks at Ares, then casts his eyes down to the floor.

“I’ve been waiting six.” Ares’s voice is low, and it sends a fissure of awareness through me. The sophisticated clothes don’t hide the fierce man beneath. I shift away from him on instinct. Ares’s darkened eyes snap over to me when I do. Ollie places a steadying hand on my shoulder and the blackness bleeds away immediately, leaving behind the beautiful burnished brown. “What Milo was trying to tell you *cara*, is that each of us will continue to struggle a bit during this adjustment period.” He clasps my hand in his. “Its normal to feel a little out of sorts, on edge,” he finishes.

It’s quiet for only seconds before Ollie interjects, “Are you sure you weren’t adopted?”

“Jesus Oliver,” Dante groans. I gaze up to Ollie’s sweet face, his long hair is tied back with only few stray pieces escaping. His full lips are turned down in a frown and his brow is wrinkled. The thought never crossed my mind. Could I be? I dismiss the idea as soon as it forms. I know I look like my mom, she even has the same abnormality in her eyes as I do. Hers is much subtler, you have to look really hard to see her right eye has a pie shaped piece of green cutting through the brown. Most people just mistakenly think her eyes are hazel.

“No,” I finally respond after giving the question some genuine thought. “I really don’t think so.”

“But...” Ollie looks around. “You said your mom’s sick right?” I nod. “See, that’s the thing, we don’t really get sick, and if she’s your mom and you’re an Infinity like us, then I don’t see how it’s possible.”

“Wait, you don’t get sick, like ever?” I question, wondering how that’s even possible.

“We get sick,” Milo places his phone on the middle cushion, “but only before your united in an Infinity, afterwards our bodies tend to fight off anything that could get us sick.”

I shake my head. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. The only thing abnormal about me is my ability to blend in. I don’t have any powers, neither does my mom.”

It’s quiet for several minutes. Ollie eventually abandons the arm of the couch for the much more comfortable position he was in previously. He crooks his inner elbow over his eyes and sighs. “I feel like I haven’t slept in ages,” he says around a yawn. A yawn over takes me in the next second. I lie my head back with the intention to relax for a moment.

Dante and Ares start up a quiet conversation. “Why didn’t you tell me you had moved above the garage?”

“Because I didn’t want you coming home just because of me, if you were happy where you were I wanted you to stay there.”

Ares snorts. “Happy wasn’t what I would call it, I was surviving.”

“I was doing the same. I hated being in this house all alone, even when Milo and Oliver were with me, it felt wrong.” My eyes fall shut, I feel like I’m invading their privacy but I’m helpless to get up. Their words grow even more faint as I begin to drift off. I know it’s happening and I don’t stop it. I’m tired of being in my tiny RV alone, waking up at every sound. I just need a few moments’ rest and I’ll ask Dante or Milo to drive me back.



“LAURA,” A DEEP VOICE COOS. “LAURA, WE NEED TO GET YOU HOME BEFORE your mom calls the cops.” I turn, rolling into a ball in the corner.

“She won’t call,” I murmur, falling back to sleep almost immediately.

“I don’t want you to get into trouble.” Dante brushes my hair away from my face, still trying to wake me.

“I won’t. I promise.” The weight of a soft blanket settles over my

shoulders, I burrow down even further.



JOLTING AWAKE I SHOOT UPRIGHT. THE ROOM IS DARK AND I CAN HEAR THE sounds of heavy breathing. I'm momentarily disoriented. I pat what should be the cushion next to me but my hand lands on a denim covered thigh. I pull back and drop my hand back down gently. As my eyes adjust I see the white glow of Ares's button-up shirt beside me. His arms are out wide on either side of the back of the couch, with his neck pillowed on the cushion. I roll my head around on my shoulders, my back isn't used to sleeping on something so soft, nor am I used to sitting half up. I turn to the left, wondering where the others went, until I see Dante with his head supported on the arm of the couch. His legs are outstretched, almost reaching Ares, propped up on a pillow on the table. Squinting my eyes, I can make out a shape on the sofa across from me. It could be Milo or Ollie, it's too dark to tell.

Should I wake them? I feel bad. Did they stay down here because of me? They could have gone to bed. Ares stirs ever so slightly and takes a deeper breath. I lean in close, going toward his ear. "Ares," I whisper, no response so I lean in a little more. My upper body is almost touching his. "Ares," I murmur, hoping not to wake the others. It's my fault they're sleeping on the couch, but at least the others are lying down. He still doesn't wake. One last time I lean in close, I feel the scruff of his jaw on the crest of my cheek, my chest brushing up against his. With my lips at his ear I mutter, "Ares." He stops breathing. Still whispering I add, "You should go lie down." He hums a noncommittal response.

I feel the weight of his arm settle on my back. "Do you need to be home tonight?" His voice is low, thick with sleep.

"No."

He grunts at my reply. The weight of his arm leaves my back and I pull away, ducking as his arm passes over my head. Ares stands, reaching both arms over his head in a drowsy stretch. He twists his back left then right until an audible crack sounds and he lets out a low groan. I feel slightly guilty that I'm the cause of his discomfort.

I curl back into the couch, tucking myself against the corner. Ares takes a step in my direction, and I pull my knees in tighter so he can pass without

having to climb over Dante's legs. Instead he stops in front of me and leans down. His arms go under the backs of my knees and under my arms. I stiffen, it doesn't stop him from lifting me right off the couch and stepping around the table. "What are you doing?" I hiss.

"Going to lie down."

"Where are you taking me?" A tiny bit of panic invades my voice, for a moment I think to scream for help.

Ares stops, he looks down at me. I can't make out his features in the darkness, but his voice is soft when he answers, "I..." he stammers. "I just want to be near you for a little while *cara*."

"Should we just go back to the couch then?" I bite my lip, I don't think he would do anything to hurt me, but I barely know any of them really.

"We can, I can put you right back where you were. I'll stay right there next to you." He waits for my response.

"You can go lay down. I'm used to sleeping on the couch. it doesn't bother me."

"No, you stay, I stay." He turns around to return to the sofa. That more than anything changes my mind.

"I'll try," I mumble. "But I want to walk."

Ares's steps falter, he doesn't say anything as he bends, placing my bare feet on the floor. I move a few steps away, straightening my clothes as I do. Silently I trail behind him as he passes through an archway leading away from the kitchen. It's darker the further we go, the dim glow afforded by the moonlight beaming through the French doors fades with every step. Ares is just a silhouette in front of me now. We've only gone a short distance when he reaches back for my hand. Grateful for the guidance, I squeeze his fingers in return.

Ares stops shortly thereafter. The click of a door unlatching is loud in the surrounding quiet. The space beyond is pitch black. I can't see a silver of light through a curtain. My heart rate edges up a few more notches. I want to run my hands over the wall to find a light switch, but Ares just strolls in, slowly stopping after about ten paces.

"Climb in," Ares's voice severs the silence. I lift my free hand and pat the space to my right.

"I can't see." Ares drops my hand and I suck in a breath. I hadn't realized how much comfort the connection was giving me.

Seconds later his hands find my waist. He lifts me a few inches off floor

and my hands go to his chest to brace myself. I'm completely disorientated. The back of my calves hit something firm and I bend my knees as he releases me onto a low bed.

My breaths are coming in short pants. I don't like not knowing what's around me. "Ares," I call into the darkness.

"I'm right here." I feel the mattress shift, so I scoot back with my hands behind me, careful not to fall off the edge.

"Is this your room? It's so dark."

"I can actually see you perfectly." He doesn't answer my question.

"I can't see anything." To prove my point I wave my hand right in front of my face, there's nothing. Ares snatches my hand out of the air.

"Lay down, I thought you were tired," he grumbles. I was, when I felt safe cuddled into the couch with all of them around, now I feel more alert than if I was at home alone. Patting the bed, I search for the pillow and I slowly lower my head, facing in his direction. I'm relieved to know he's right next to me, but I'm also a little frightened for the same reason.

I draw in a deep breath through my mouth and hold it for a second before releasing it down over my bottom lip.

Eventually, when he doesn't move or speak, my body begins to relax into the softness of the mattress. There's a cool breeze flowing over my back and arm, the air vent must be pointed in my direction.

I lay awake for what feels like hours with Ares sleeping peacefully beside me, his breathing is even, steady. At some point I turn over, too chilled to stay still any longer. Reaching for the edge of the blanket I pull it over me, burrowing into the warmth.



THE CLICK OF THE DOOR WAKES ME, I DIDN'T EVEN REALIZE I'D FALLEN asleep. There's a heady warmth behind me. Blinking, I get my first impressions of the room. It's dark. The walls are a textured slate gray. In front of me is a curtain of heavy black drapes reaching from floor to ceiling. The light shining into the room is coming from behind me. I peer over my shoulder aware of the heat there. The top of Ares's dark hair is against my back. Movement catches my eye. Squinting I look at the other side of the room. Dante is standing in the open doorframe. His hard eyes focused on me.

I sit straight up, dislodging Ares as I do.

“What’s wrong?” My voice is thick with sleep. Kicking the blanket from my legs I push my feet to the floor and rise. The bed is low to the ground and covered in a heavy black comforter. That’s about all I have time to notice before Dante is in the room, stalking over to the bed and giving Ares’s back a shove. He grunts in response, still sleeping deeply.

“What the hell, why is he still sleeping?” Dante’s eyes search mine. “What were you guys doing that he’s still passed out?” Realization dawns, I know what he’s implying. I cross my arms over my stomach, hurt by his assumption.

This isn’t the first time Dante has assumed I’m an easy lay. I don’t bother giving him an answer, he wouldn’t believe me, but more importantly, I don’t owe him one.

“I’m so tired of your wishy-washy back and forth crap Dante. That’s twice you’ve treated me like a whore,” I growl at him through my teeth, uncaring if I wake up Ares or not.

His mouth pops open like I’ve shocked him. Did he think because I choose to go unnoticed at school that I was some wallflower? The thud of fast footsteps draws his attention to the hall. Ollie slides to a stop next to Dante, his eyes go from me to the bed, then up to Dante, then jerk back to the bed.

I look down too, Ares’s naked back is on full display. A little of the wind leaves my sails. I don’t know when he took his shirt off, but maybe Dante isn’t completely to blame for his assumption. Looking away I jut my chin out. It’s none of his business either way.

“Fuck off Dante,” Ares mumbles from the bed. All eyes watch as he pulls the pillow I was using over his head, covering it with his arm. I narrow my eyes—how long has he been awake and listening, and why didn’t he say something sooner?

When no one else bothers to say anything, I shove past Dante and Ollie. I take a few steps and stall. I have no idea where I’m going. It was way too dark last night to venture a guess at which way the kitchen is.

I spin on my heel. “Don’t we need to get to school? Why are you guys just standing there?”

A door opens across the room revealing a youngish dark-haired woman. Her legs look impossibly long in a pair of black stiletto trousers. A cream fitted sweater with a wide neck falls to just above her hips. My back

straightens, and I run my hand over my messy hair. I'm caught in the middle. I don't feel comfortable going back to Dante and I can't walk past her either, she obviously belongs here and knows exactly where she is. I, on the other hand, can't even find the door to get the hell out of here.

The mystery woman does a double take at my appearance. Her eyes linger on my bare feet and then at the door behind me.

"I came in early today. I couldn't make the trip with Ares yesterday when he returned." Her voice is soft and sweet, there's a tiny hint of an accent, but nothing I could place. "Rather quickly," she adds, her eyes narrowing on me.

Milo chooses that moment to come through from another archway. He pulls a carton of yogurt and spoon away from his mouth. "Hi Mia." A small smile lifts his lips, he likes her. Maybe even really likes her. He takes a few steps and ends up standing right in front of me. "Haven't seen you in a while, how ya been?"

Ollie steps up beside me and wraps his fingers over mine, with a tilt of his head he beckons me in a different direction. "Will your guest be here long Ollie? I need to know what to tell the others," Mia calls as we're making our way to the door. I drop my head; I know Ollie was trying to get rid of me before she could ask any questions. Milo was the distraction.

"Don't worry about her," Milo dismisses me easily. I tug my hand free from Ollie's. These guys only see me as one thing, a battery.

"I want to go home now, please." The pleasantries taste like ash on my tongue.

SIXTEEN

Instead of taking me to the car, Ollie ushers me up the stairs to Dante's studio above the garage. The brief time we spent outside clues me in that we're late for school since the sun is high in the sky. It's probably closer to noon.

Once upstairs I close myself in the bathroom, I need to pee. But more importantly, I need a few seconds without the weight of everyone's expectations. Looking in the mirror I wince, my face is flushed, the loose ponytail I was wearing yesterday is gone, leaving my hair matted. I finger brush it as best as I can to tame some of the mess. There's a bottle of mouthwash on the counter, which reminds me I didn't brush last night.

I look over at the door confirming it's locked and slowly open a few of the drawers as quietly as possible. I hit the jackpot on the first try, there's a half full tube of toothpaste. After washing my hands, I squeeze a thin line of paste on my finger and scrub my teeth, I even tip the bottle of mouthwash up, making sure the bottle doesn't touch my lips. A few swooshes later I'm as fresh as I'm going to get.

Even though I'm tempted, I don't search through the other drawers. I found what I needed.

I've stalled as long as possible. I need to head out there and demand answers, then I need to get home. I've already missed too much school today to bother going in at all, besides, I need to get ready for work tonight.

When I open the door, I expect to find Ollie, maybe even Dante, but the place is empty. After peering over the railing to see if anyone was on the stairs, I make my way over to the kitchen sink to get a drink of water. How long do they expect me to stay hidden away up here? My stomach rumbles

when I catch sight of the open pizza boxes, all that food gone to waste. We should have put it away last night.

The lower door opens and I spin, putting my back against the counter while still holding the blue plastic cup I found in the cabinet. Milo's mop of light brown hair crests the railing. His eyes search around until they land on me, and Ollie is right on his heels.

"I need to get home." My voice comes out a little softer than I intended, so I clear my throat.

"What's the rush, your mom probably thinks you're at school, unless you make a habit of staying out all night and skipping school?" Ollie tries to play his question off as a joke, but the lightness in his tone is off, forced.

"Can you give me a ride or not?" I put my cup into the empty sink and cross my arms over my stomach. I'm tired of these guys thinking they're running the show. I haven't had anyone but my mother to answer to, and that doesn't even really count. My mom is so out of it half the time she can't remember if I've even been home.

Milo looks over at Ollie then begins to explain, "We need to wait for Dante, it's his car." He's not looking at me, in fact it's like he's avoiding me. I narrow my eyes, I'm about twenty seconds from demanding they drive me home, or just walking to get the hell away from them. It would take me an hour or two, but it's not like I haven't walked that far before.

I look around and I see this studio for what it really is. It's their hangout, an older version of a fort or clubhouse. All the expensive toys, like the big screen TV and gaming systems, are just entertainment. I've been kidding myself, I don't belong here. Never have, never will.

Where the hell do Milo and Ollie even live and why is Dante the only one with a car? I get that they are always together but give me a break. That's a bit extreme.

Without another word I make my way over to the stairs. I'm so done with letting everyone else decide how I'm going to live my life, for as long as I can remember I've been taking care of my mom. She left me without as much as a goodbye. I'm not going to give these guys the chance to do the same.

Neither of them stop me as I head outside and down the long lane that doubles as Dante's driveway. The lengthy walk home is exactly what I need to finally make some decisions about my life. I've been driven here a few times now. I'm confident I can find my way back to school and from there it's an easy walk back to Turtle Creek. I should never have stayed there last

night anyway, what if my mom came home and I wasn't there?

I shake my head and clench my teeth—she left me. I'm not going to let myself fall back into the same role of easy acceptance. Once I make it to the road I keep on the gravel shoulder, my pace is a little rushed, so bits of dirt and pebbles fly with each step.

Each mailbox I pass makes the anger in my stomach rise. I shouldn't have to walk home. What a fucked up situation I've gotten myself into. I'm mad at myself for letting them convince me I could be someone important to them, no, they don't even know me. They just want what they think I can give them. Well fuck them. I'm not anyone's battery. They think they can hide me away like I'm some basement troll? That they can go on doing whatever they please while I wait around for them to think I'm good enough?

I force down the scream that wants to claw its way up my throat. My eyes water, but it's definitely not tears pooled on my lower lashes.

The purr of Dante's engine revving up the street warns me they're coming far before I even see his car. Apparently they finally noticed I'd left. It probably took Milo and Ollie five minutes to realize I wasn't just sitting in the car waiting on them like a good little pet, and another five to round up Dante.

Luckily, I'm already to the neighborhood surrounding the school so it won't be any trouble to detour down a side street. I jog up the sidewalk to the first house with a car parked out front. I duck down and pretend to tie my shoe, waiting for them to pass. Once they do, I keep heading in the new direction, bypassing the school altogether. I'm being childish, I know I am, but I can't pretend to care. It actually gives me a slight thrill to think they're looking for me.

Once I make it to the next block I make a left, hoping I can follow it down and find the street near the diner. I need to hustle. I don't want them waiting for me like yesterday.



WHEN I ENTER THE CAMPER IS EMPTY, JUST LIKE I'D ASSUMED IT WOULD BE. The heavy drapes are blocking out most of the sun, but it's stifling hot. I can barely draw a breath. I leave the door open to let some of the hot air out and make my way over to the little controls on the wall near the fridge to turn the

air unit on. The clock on the microwave tells me I have less than an hour to shower before I need to leave to make it to work on time. I gather my shower caddy and a fresh set of clothes, locking the door behind me as I go to the bathhouse.

Pushing open the heavy red door, I peer around to see if I am alone. I haven't really had much company back here, so I don't feel guilty when I throw the deadbolt, locking myself in. It's a stark reminder at the differences between the guys and me. I couldn't see Ares stepping foot in a place like this, not with his fancy vest and shoes. Ollie would find some way to make it into a joke.

The first stall doesn't work, I know because I tried it already, but I push back the yellow rubber curtain anyway. The floor is dry, as are the walls.

I set my stuff on the tiny wooden slats that make up a bench just outside the shower area of the next cubby. The curtain makes a loud screech as I pull it closed behind me. I always check the roof vents and floor grates for any sign of cameras before stripping out of my worn clothes. You never know what kind of creeps hang out in these places.

At least the water is hot when I finally dip into the spray. I'm relieved this isn't one of the places you have to buy a token for the shower to work, or where you have to keep pressing the button every five seconds so the water keeps coming out.

My dollar store flipflops slap against the tiled ground with every move I make, echoing through the room. It doesn't take me long to shampoo and condition my hair, scrub my body, and rinse.

I'm wrapped in a threadbare towel when I hear the handle of the main door jiggle. "Sorry, I locked it! Just a minute," I shout to be heard. Dropping the towel, I shove my damp legs into my jeans. I have to jump several times to get them all the way up, then I throw my shirt on, I tuck my clean underwear back into my basket, intending to finish getting dressed at the trailer. Lastly, I gather my dirty stuff and wrap it in my used towel.

I'm out of breath when I unlock the door, pulling it open seconds later. Ares is standing in front of me, with his arms folded over his chest. The white button down shirt and vest are gone, replaced with a fitted black t-shirt, dark jeans and black boots. If I hadn't met him yesterday, I'd probably be slamming the door back in his face and locking it. His narrowed eyes scan me from head to toe then back up again. When his eyes meet mine, his nostrils flare and his lips pinch tight. The darkness starts to creep over his irises,

concealing the pretty orange flecks.

“What?” My hands are full, so I can’t give him the same pissed off pose he’s giving me, but after the shock of seeing him wears off, I give him the best fuck off face I can muster.

Ares’s hands reach out and he grabs my bundled up towel from me. He goes for the bath caddy too, but I don’t release the handle. We have a mini stare down during the tug of war that has him baring his teeth at me. He finally lets go and I almost stumble backwards from the force, I was pulling that hard.

“Why are you here?” I question him again when he shows no sign of answering my first question. I look around behind him, making sure Mike, the camp host, isn’t witnessing our exchange.

Ares closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “Apparently, my brothers aren’t capable of keeping track of you.”

I lean forward my voice tight. “No one will be keeping track of me.” I reach out with every intention of stealing the towel back, but Ares grabs my wrist and pulls me forward. I collide with his torso and bounce back a step. He doesn’t release me.

My mouth falls open in outrage, and I can’t believe he thinks he can manhandle me. I drop the caddy, uncaring that all my stuff spills out, and use my fingers to pry his hand from my wrist. “Let me go, you big asshole.” It’s useless; I can’t budge his hand from mine. I stop struggling and look up to meet his eyes. In that moment I want nothing more than to have control. “Let me go.” The command is soft, barely a whisper, but Ares immediately drops my hand. I look down to see welts forming around the bones of my wrist. I wrap my fingers around the redness and gently twist over the area.

Ares steps back. His eyes on my hands and he peers down at his own as if he doesn’t recognize it. “*Cara*, I’m sorry.” He shakes his head slowly. “I shouldn’t have...”

“You’re damn right you shouldn’t have.” I’m in disbelief. I can’t believe I trusted this guy enough last night to sleep next to him. All because I was worried about his comfort. I’m an idiot.

I shove past him. Ares falters back a step or two like he’s off balance. I’m in a full out sprint when I get to my RV. I pull the handle and let my head slam forward on the flimsy door. For the second time I’m locked out. My keys are probably on the ground with all my other stuff back at the bathroom.

I tilt my face to the sky, anger, fear, and frustration warring inside me. My thoughts are racing, I feel trapped. I want to run from Canton. Pretend I never stepped foot in this shit town. But I can't, I can't leave without knowing what happened to my mom.

"Laura." There's a hesitancy in Ares's voice when he calls my name. I turn around letting my back hit the door before sliding down to land on the step. He's standing off to the side, keeping several feet of distance between us. I don't look at him, instead I let my eyes gaze focus out in the distance. In my peripheral vision I see Ares scrub his hands over his face a few times.

"No one is supposed to come here." My voice wavers. I don't know how much more I can take, I'm close to losing the thread of sanity I have left. I want my mom, I want her to tell me everything is going to be all right. I snort out loud. Who am I kidding, that's never been my mom. I've always been the one that had to keep her from falling apart. I want to let it all go for just a little while, I thought that's what I was doing yesterday, but it's all still there. My mom is still gone, I'm a few hundred dollars away from being homeless, and I have four guys trying to convince me I'm somehow destined to be part of their group. Yet, they can't manage to be nice to me for more than five seconds. Oh yeah, sign me up for a lifetime of servitude to a bunch of assholes who want me to stay hidden like some Quasifuckingmodo.

"Oliver told me we weren't allowed to disturb your mom." Ares examines his hands flipping them back and forth a few times. "*Cara*, I'm so sorry I grabbed you."

"Laura, my name is Laura. Not *Cara*."

Ares nods his head vigorously and continues, "I... that... I'm not sure..." He struggles to find words finally settling on, "That will never happen again."

"You know you guys are ridiculous, right?" I tilt my head, looking in his direction. Ares straightens his spine. "You think I'm desperate enough to cling to a bunch of guys that are barely able to tolerate me?" My tone is flat, unaffected. I don't mention the way they acted like I didn't even exist in front of that girl who was looking for him. I can't imagine what would have happened if she had found me in his bed instead of Dante, him calling me a slut was bad enough.

I spread my arms wide, encompassing my surroundings. "You think I'll let you treat me like dirt, because I don't know any better. I'm just trailer trash, right?" My voice rising as I come to my feet.

“Ca...Laura,” Ares corrects, “you don’t understand.” When I open my mouth to argue he lifts his hand, his eyes pleading with me to let him finish. “We lost hope that you even existed. I know you doubt what we’re telling you is real, but it is. It’s so real that none of us can keep our heads straight long enough to even give you an explanation.”

“Why?” He flinches at my question.

“Why?” Ares repeats, swallowing quickly.

I nod. “Yes, why can’t you just explain everything to me, why do you keep acting like there’s stuff you guys aren’t telling me?” I cross my arms over my stomach defensively. “And why are you guys acting like jerks half the time?”

Ares looks around, his eyes flit over his shoulder then back to me. “Can we talk about this somewhere else? I think there are somethings you haven’t told us either.”

I blink several times, studying his face. “What are you talking about? See, you can’t even answer my questions now.” What could he know?

Ares takes a few steps closer to me and my back goes rigid. “I will answer your questions, I just think there’s a better place to do it.” He eyes the RV behind me. I have an easy excuse not to let him in, my mom. In truth, after all my blustering I’m still embarrassed about how we live.

Not meeting his eyes, I shift on my feet. “Not here, my mom is resting.”

“Laura.” The sympathy I hear in his voice can only mean one thing. He knows.

SEVENTEEN

“*T*here’s nobody else in that RV.” Ares’s words sting, even though he delivers them gently. My heart thunders in my ears and I drop my chin. How does he know?

“She could be back any second, you shouldn’t be here.”

Ares tilts his head and pauses, his eyes a little wide. I know he doesn’t believe me, hell I wouldn’t believe me either. I didn’t even try very hard to make the lie convincing. “Why don’t you tell me what’s really going on.”

Before I have time to formulate a response I hear the whirr of an electric engine. Mike turns the corner. I know the moment he sees us, me with my tangled soaking wet hair and Ares, standing a few feet away. The golf cart jerks to a stop. Mike turns the wheel so he’s now heading in our direction.

“Mr. Costa, I didn’t know you were back in town,” he addresses Ares while keeping his eyes locked on me. I shuffle my feet and cross my arms over my chest, only now realizing I don’t have a bra on. My things still litter the ground at the bathhouse, which is probably where he was headed before he spotted us.

Ares turns to face him, taking a few steps over so he blocks me from Mike’s sight. “Just got back yesterday.” His voice is polite, but there’s a formalness in his tone I hadn’t noticed before.

“What brings you out this way?” Mike leans over, making it clear he’s looking at me.

Ares’s back stiffens, his voice is tight when he answers, “Miss Fallen is in need of a ride.” I don’t think Ares likes being questioned.

I step out from behind Ares. “I’m working at the diner, Maggie doesn’t like that I’ve been walking,” I offer as an explanation. Mike’s eyes run down

my body, narrowing on my hair. "I'm running late. I had to shower after school."

"Your momma okay with you getting a ride? No offensive Mr. Costa, I just don't want you getting into trouble for trying to help out."

I can't tell if he thinks I'm the type of girl who would try to take advantage of the fact that Ares is older than me, and obviously has money, or if he's warning me that I should let my mom know I'll be around Ares. Probably both.

"Yes sir, my mom knows. Maggie is expecting me in a few minutes. I just realized I forgot my caddy at the bathhouse." Without another word I turn on my heel and speed walk back to showers. If Mike were to find all my stuff on the ground, he would have been really suspicious.

My steps falter when I see the red door, there's nothing there. All my stuff is gone. Ares must have picked it up already. I can't go back now empty handed, Mike will think I'm nuts. I peek through the trees; the golf cart is still parked in the same position. Ares didn't have anything in his hands when he found me at my trailer, so maybe he put my things back in the showers? I spot a black SUV parked next to the cinderblock building. That has to be Ares's, there's a good chance he would have put my stuff in there. I cup my hands around my eyes and peer into the tinted windows. There it is, my caddy crammed with all my stuff on the front passenger seat, my stretched out bra and plain blue panties are folded on top. How humiliating, this can't be happening to me. I feel heat rise up my neck and cheeks and even my ears flush. The sight of my crumpled towel still balled up curbs some of the embarrassment; at least he didn't see all my dirty stuff too.

With my eyes close I pull the handle. Praying the door is unlocked and an alarm doesn't go off. A breath leaves me in a whoosh with I hear a small click as the door opens. Snatching my underwear first, I shove them into my pockets.

Mike is out of the golf cart talking with Ares when I return, slightly out of breath from rushing. What have they been talking about?

I pull my lips up, forcing a smile as I approach. Ares pauses his quiet conversation, gazing at me. I bite my lip, pleading with him with my eyes not to tell Mike my mom isn't here.

"I was just telling Mr. Harris that your mother was lying down, since she hasn't been feeling well."

I nod my head a little too vigorously, turning my eyes to Mike. "I think

she has a touch of the flu.” I’m so grateful Ares didn’t tell the truth. “I’m going to check to make sure she’s still sleeping and put this stuff away.” I lift my full arms up. “Did you need something Mike? I can leave a note for when she wakes up.”

His lips twist and Mike shakes his head. “Naw, just haven’t really seen her since ya’ll came in.” Mike makes his way back over to the golf cart, giving me one more long look before pushing the button and driving away. He doesn’t head to the bathhouse like I expected, but back toward the front of the camp. Did he see Ares come in and was checking on me?

Shuffling my bundle, I sort through my caddy for my keys. Tucked half under my conditioner, I pull them free. Ares steps up behind me holding the screen door open, I don’t have any real reason to let him in, but I don’t want to. I peek over my shoulder, wondering what he’ll think.

“I guess you’re coming in,” I mutter under my breath. Ares doesn’t reply as I swing the door open, my keys still dangling from it. I step up and the camper shifts, his weight on the stair enough to make it bounce. He couldn’t get any closer unless he was carrying me. Thankfully, the air unit is churning along and the temperature has dropped several degrees since I left for my shower. I walk over to the long cabinet that holds our hamper and drop my towel in before closing it back up tight. I haven’t looked at him. I don’t want to see his face just yet. I’ll just let it sink in for a few seconds how very different we are.

Next, I place my caddy under the sink in the tiny bathroom, as I start to close the accordion style door, I stop. I still need to put my clean underwear on. The bathroom would offer more privacy, but it’s so damn small in there I get claustrophobic just thinking about it.

Over my shoulder I call, “I’ll be out in just a second.” I don’t want him coming to look for me, not like I could go anywhere, but I want to warn him anyway.

Fully dressed, I slide the curtain to my room back to find Ares sitting in the middle of my tiny threadbare couch, which is as hard as a rock. Most of the cushions are flat and the steel frame of the pullout bed underneath pokes out in all the wrong places. We haven’t even used the bed in years because mom always preferred the couch.

His arms are spread out wide, reaching from end to end. He looks completely at ease. Most people would stay standing, or if they did sit, they’d be perched on the edge. Ares is acting like it’s a luxury sofa. Like he doesn’t

even notice the difference.

I jerk my head down, avoiding eye contact. I don't want him to see the relief on my face. "You're working tonight?" His soft question breaks the silence.

I pull out one of the rickety chairs from the small wooden dinette. "Yes." I squint to see the clock on the microwave. "I need to be there in twenty minutes."

Ares takes a deep breath and runs his hand over his hair. "Any chance you could call in?" His nose and brow have a slight wrinkle, he knows the answer. It was like he didn't even want to ask. I pinch my lips together and shake my head no.

"I can't, I need the money," I say looking at the floor. "Plus, I wouldn't do that to her. Not when she's expecting me to be there."

"Okay, you should grab whatever you'll need. One of us will pick you up and we can go home. There's still a lot of stuff we need to figure out." Home, home where? Does he mean to take me to his house again?

"I don't get off until nine, and I have school tomorrow." I shrug my shoulders, uncertain of what his plans are.

"That's fine, I don't think any of us expected to crash the way we did last night. We'll talk and get things sorted out. You'll be in bed before eleven."

I tap my fingers on the table, doubtful a few more hours of talking are going to resolve all the issues we have. "We still can't come here. Mike would notice if I had a bunch of guys coming into my camper, and... my mom, she might come back." I bite my lip looking away.

"We'll go back to our house, that's why I said grab some stuff."

"But, there was—"

"We should get you to Maggie's before you're late," Ares interrupts me before I can mention the woman that was looking for him this morning. He stands, looking at a watch on his wrist. Noticing the clock on the microwave, I curse under my breath before scrambling back to my bedroom to sort through the basket of clothes that are still piled on the bed from last weekend.

I grab a t-shirt and the first pair of jeans my hands land on, but have to dig through the small mound to find my last clean pair of panties. I only have two bras, so I grab my extra, shoving it into my backpack with my other things. The red lacy panties I found on Dante's floor come to mind, as does the argument we had when he said they were mine.

The screech of the curtain sliding across the bar that separates the rooms

is loud. Ares is standing in the kitchen now, his arms crossed over his chest and feet spread wide. My eyes dart to the freezer and my instincts tell me he's been snooping through my things. With my backpack slung over one shoulder I shuffle my feet. "We should go." I don't like him being here.

Ares doesn't say a word as he takes two short steps to the door. As he steps down, the camper tilts to the left as he exits. He holds the door open as I follow behind him, waiting while I lock the door.

Ares strides toward the bathhouse. I have brief moment to wonder what Maggie will think when we pull up together, maybe I'll get lucky and she'll be in the back when he drops me off. I hustle to keep up with him as he treads to the passenger side of the vehicle, opening the door. I lower my head to avoid his gaze but round the door. I've never had anyone open a car door for me the way he does. It's different than when one of the guys opened the door, they were getting in too, whereas this is more deliberate.

I take a moment to examine his car. I didn't really have the opportunity earlier, I was just in a hurry to get my things. The interior is black leather with a beautiful camel brown down the center and it's buttery soft. The door closes with a soft click as I pile my backpack into my lap. I feel way out of my element. This is fancy, there's a wide screen where a radio would typically be. The center console is a thickly grained wood. It's super shiny, not a speck of dust mars any of the surfaces. Ares opens the driver's side door, folding gracefully into the seat. A moment later he pushes a button on the dash, bringing the car to life.

"Seat belt," he mutters, not bothering with his own as he turns a dial and pulls onto the dirt path that serves as a road. Reaching over my shoulder I snap in, repositioning my bag.

Completely opposite to Dante's muscle car, I can barely feel or hear the engine as the vehicle glides smoothly toward the entrance. Movement at Mike's trailer catches my eye. He is standing on his small front porch, watching us leave. I know he can't see into the car, the windows are tinted too dark, but he's clear as day. I see him give a slight shake of his head when we hit the blacktop road.

I tighten my arms over my backpack. I want to run my fingers over the screen and touch all the little buttons to see what they do, but I refrain. I do, however, bush my knuckles over the supple leather of my seat.

Ares is relaxed, his left hand at the top of the steering wheel and right elbow cradled on the divider between us, fingers grazing the wood beneath.

He glances at me a few times, his eyes trailing over me briefly.

As the sign for the diner comes into view my stomach hollows. It seems like it's been ages since I was here, while in truth it's only been two days. But so much has happened in those two days. The car dies seconds after Ares turns the dial to the P, the doors unlocking automatically. "Thank you for the ride," I rush out, reaching for the handle at the same time. Ares stops me with his palm cupping my shoulder; I freeze, one leg already dangling outside, my body angled away from him.

When he doesn't say anything right away I peer over my shoulder, waiting for him to release me. Warmth starts to pool under his palm, and a calmness slides over me. He's doing something to me that affects my emotions. It's not the first time, but I'm beginning to recognize when he's doing it. The blackness in his eyes expands cover his iris, but isn't leeching into the whites. I shrug his palm free and narrow my eyes at him. The foreign feeling of warmth fades, but the calmness lingers, sapping the anger I want to have toward him from manipulating my feelings. "You need to stop doing that to me." Ares's eyes widen, the color returning to what I guess is his norm.

"It's nothing I have control over," he confesses, his voice low, like he hates to even admit it to himself.

"Well it's not right, you can't choose how I feel." I slide out of the car, slamming the door behind me, and it's completely unsatisfying. Instead of the harsh sound I expected, I get a low thud like the car itself denied me. *Stupid fancy ass car.*

The second door closing—a little gentler than mine—alerts me that Ares is following. I pick up my pace, so I'm almost jogging. He still makes it to the door before me, holding it open so I can enter. I push past the second door myself, rushing to the back where I usually put my bag. I keep my head down, I don't want to know who's here, and has seen us arrive together.

I tie an apron over my jeans and wash my hands in the big tub. My hair is mostly dry, hanging down my back, and I'm so discombobulated I'm lucky my pants aren't on backwards. I tuck a few loose strands behind my ear, hoping it isn't too much of a frizzy mess. One deep breath later, I nod my head, ready for whatever is coming my way.

As I exit the back I'm greeted with the sight of Maggie and Ares. She's looking into his smiling face—a true smile—his eyes are alight with affection as he gazes down at her. Maggie reaches up, both of her palms covering

Ares's cheeks, pinching a little so his full lips are pursed. He shakes his head dislodging her hands but reaches down and embraces her.

I'm caught in the moment, I don't look around at the restaurant to see if anyone needs my attention. Hell, I can't seem to look away, even when Ares opens his eyes and finds me staring at them. I don't look away. He pulls back from Maggie, eyes still glued to mine, and as she notices his lack of attention, she peers over her shoulder, finding me behind them.

That's when the spell is finally broken. I shake away the tightness in my chest, the loneliness their reunion invoked, and get to work. I avoid Maggie for as long as possible, even after Ares finally leaves without saying goodbye to me. I keep telling myself the slight pang I feel in my stomach is just hunger, not sadness that he ignored me the same way I was ignoring him.

Fatigue sets in well before my shift is over, I'm grateful it's one of the busier nights. "Have you taken a break at all Laura?" Maggie's concerned voice catches me as I pass by the bar to get another refill.

"I will soon," I promise over my shoulder, intending to do just that as soon as I have a second. I need food, I haven't eaten all day. While I'm used to going hungry occasionally, my body is telling me now isn't one of those times. It's near closing time when I put in an order for lasagna with Gus. I've been craving it ever since the night I ate with the guys. There are only a few tables left, and all of them have been served their meals so I don't feel guilty when I drop my plate and my body into the back table, which is usually reserved for rolling napkins and cleaning the plastic menus. I sigh as achiness invades my bones, I thought I was coming down with something last week, but once I slept I seemed be fine. Right now though, I feel like complete crap.

As the first bite melts on my tongue the chime above the door jingles. I close my eyes, savoring the flavor. The 'seat yourself sign' is posted, so I have a second before I need to get up. "Hey boys," Maggie calls, interrupting my reprieve.

"Hey Gran," Milo returns.

"You guys been busy tonight?" Ollie questions, sliding into the booth across from me. I take a deep breath noticing he looks about as good as I feel. His skin is pale, and his eyes are glassy. He even has a swath of darkness under his eyes. I immediately feel guilty, he must have slept on the couch last night too, not much though by the looks of it.

"Not too busy, are you feeling okay?"

Ollie's lips thin as I examine him.

“Oh yeah, I’m good.” He looks away from me and pushes himself back in the bench, sitting up a little straighter.

“Well I feel horrid. I was feeling off last week. Nothing too bad, but I think it finally caught up to me. Sorry if I gave you my cold.” Ollie’s hand reaches across the table and he snags my breadstick, taking a big bite from the end. Without thought I reach over and snatch it right back shoving the next bite in my mouth. His lips round in surprise before a chuckle leaves his chest.

He glances up behind me. “Remind me not to steal her food, she’s kinda greedy.” The words are spoken lightly, but I feel a tinge of embarrassment anyway.

“I’m sorry, here.” I try to hand him the breadstick, my eyes on the table. Arm still outstretched, I scoot over when someone bends into the booth next to me.

I feel a hand on my wrist, gently pushing. “Laura, I was just kidding, eat.” Ollie doesn’t sound affronted, he sounds genuine. I peek up at him, and I notice his eyes are brighter and he has a slight flush to his cheeks.

I feel an arm lift and land on the back of the bench behind me. Turning my head, I see Milo, his hair is disheveled and he’s wearing a threadbare green t-shirt. Is he getting sick too?

I swirl my fork in the red sauce on the plate, still hungry, but a little self-conscious to eat when they aren’t. “Eat Laura, we already had dinner,” Milo tells me like he knows exactly what I’m thinking. I take a quick look over my shoulder, making sure no one needs anything before scooping up my next bite. Within minutes I’m already feeling better. I need to make sure I’m eating regularly or I really will end up sick.

Ollie jumps up with much more pep in his step as he swaggers up to the counter. I track him as he hops over the bar. “Oliver,” Maggie scolds, catching him in the act as she returns from the kitchen.

Unabashed, Ollie grabs a cloth from the bleach bucket and makes a point of walking all the way around to the booth that was just vacated by an older couple. He drops the damp towel on the table before gathering the mugs and plates left behind, taking them to the kitchen. My cheeks heat, will Maggie think he’s doing my job? I turn to Milo to ask him to let me up, but he just nods down to my half-full plate of food. “He’s just cleaning up one table Laura, this is probably your first break?” I nod my head confirming his assumption. “Just eat while we finish up so we can get out of here.” I open

my mouth to argue, but Milo surprises me. He slowly trails his finger from my cupid's bow and down over both of my lips, effectively halting my refusal. "Before you argue, it's for selfish reasons. Everyone is waiting at home."

Suddenly, Milo's out of the seat and taking up where Ollie left off, taking the dishes into the back. I eat as much as I'm comfortable with, grabbing a small takeaway box without meeting Maggie's eyes. She's been in the back for the most part, but there's no way she didn't know the guys were helping me get ready to end my shift.

Maggie kicks us out about twenty minutes earlier than usual, with three of us closing up everything was done quicker than I'm used to. She gives each of the boys a short hug, and then makes her way over to me. Wrapping her arms around me she whispers in my ear, "I knew you were coming." I stiffen in her arms wondering what she means. She holds on as I try to pull back. "Your journey hasn't been an easy one. I wish I could tell you all of that will change now, but I won't lie to you." Finally, she pulls back, still holding my shoulders. "They'll come for your power." Maggie's eyes cloud over in white as her head lulls back on her neck.

"Maggie?" My panicked tone has Milo rushing over to his grandma. Her grip on my arms tightens and she flinches.

"Gran?" Milo calls sternly as her head lifts and she looks over in his direction, eyes still milky white. "Be ready son, all of you need to be ready." Maggie wilts into Milo's arms, finally releasing me. I cross my arms, rubbing the places her hands were. Ollie comes up behind me, pulling me into his chest.

Maggie opens her eyes to reveal the soft blue I'm used to. Her face scrunches. "Oh damn, that was a bad one." She looks from me, to Ollie, then to Milo who is still next to her.

"Do you remember anything Gran?" Milo grabs her hand, staring between her eyes.

Maggie pinches her lips and bring a hand up to pat her hair. "Milo, you know how it works. I don't remember anything. What did I say?"

Milo turns to me, I slump my shoulders under his scrutiny. Ollie's arms wrap over the top of my chest in a protective manor. "It's okay Laura, Maggie is like us. She's like a precog, or an oracle. What did she say to you?"

I glance at Maggie freaked out that I've found myself in the middle of

some alternate reality. “Laura,” Milo urges.

“She...” My brain isn’t coming up with what she said.

“Laura?” Milo barks. I jump, his urgency not helping calm me enough to make me remember.

I try again “She said... she knew I was coming, or something like that.” I look at Maggie, hoping it will jump-start my thoughts and my teeth start to chatter together. The memory of her eyes going white instills a fear in me that the darkness in Ares’s eyes didn’t.

“Did she say anything else?” Ollie prods from over my shoulder.

I clear my throat. “Something about power, they were coming for the power. Then her eyes went white and I yelled.”

Milo spins back to face off with his grandmother. “Do you have any idea what you could have meant?”

Maggie’s face tightens. “Milo, I’m giving you some leeway cause you’re my grandson, but don’t you dare look at me like that boy. You think if I knew anything I wouldn’t tell you?” She turns away from him, crossing her arms. Milo looks down and places his hand on Maggie’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry Gran, I didn’t mean...”

“Yeah, well you better start meaning what you say and owning your actions.” Her eyebrows rise in challenge as she gives him a perfected side eye. “Now take Laura home, and if you damn fools don’t get your shit together to help *her* through this process, I’m going to make all of you pick a switch.” With that Maggie turns on her heels and storms to the kitchen door, letting it slap closed behind her.

EIGHTEEN

Ollie leads me from the restaurant with his hands on my upper shoulders. The black Range Rover is parked right outside the door. It chirps and the lights flash when we get close. I'm ushered into the passenger seat, and Ollie leans over me to grab my seatbelt but I swat his hands away. I'm not an invalid. Milo jogs out seconds later, climbing into the backseat.

I barely remember the ride to Dante's house. The shock of seeing Maggie's eyes cloud over stays with me the whole ride, along with her warning. Now that the pressure is off me, and I have a second to recall her words, they come easily. I'm completely clueless as to whom she was referring to, but it sounds like we need to be worried.

There's a small black car parked in front of the garage as we pull up to the main house. I'm instantly on edge. I reach down for my bag out of habit, only to remember I didn't grab it from the diner. The passenger door opens as I curse under my breath.

"What's wrong?" Dante asks, poking his head into the car.

"I forgot my bag at Maggie's." Feeling dejected, I hit the button to release my seatbelt. Dante leans back enough so I can slide out.

"We can grab it on the way to school tomorrow, come on." The door to Dante's clubhouse opens, not revealing anything but shadows. I stop, waiting for whomever it is to step into the circle of light coming from the lamps on the garage. Ares moves into the light with the woman from this morning tucked under his arm. An unwarranted jealous rage tightens my throat. I clench my fist, fighting my body's reaction, wanting to go over there and remove his arm from around her. My focus is solely on him as my vision

starts to waver. I hadn't even realized I'd been holding my breath. I turn my back on them, disgusted with Ares and myself for how I'm feeling.

When I turn to Dante, he's watching the couple behind me. I don't wait for him, instead I rush up the few stairs leading to a side door Milo and Ollie already disappeared through. It opens to a small mudroom. Several sets of shoes line the wall behind the door, and I kick off my worn sneakers, keeping them away from any of the others. My shoes stick out here, just like I do.

I take a few more steps into the room, looking past the doorframe into the space beyond. It opens up to a long narrow hallway with a closed door on the right, and set of stairs leading up to the second floor at the other end. Uncertain where to go, I wait for Dante to come in. I just want to take a shower and climb in bed; I'm so tired of this constant upheaval. I let my back hit the wall, sliding down to the floor beside my shoes.

A door opens nearby and Ollie pokes his head into the mudroom, searching around before his gaze lands on me where I sit on the floor. His brows furrow, "What are you doing, where is Dante and Ares?"

I roll my eyes and shrug. "Out there still with that woman, I guess." The exterior door opens, emitting Dante and Ares. Neither of them gets very far when they see me sitting on the floor and Ollie leaning on the doorframe. "What's going on?" Ares questions, looking back and forth between Ollie and me.

"I just asked that question." Ollie crosses his arms over his chest, somehow looking down on Ares and Dante even though I think they each have an inch or two on him. Ares pushes past Dante, coming to stand in front of me. He reaches his hand out, offering it to me. I ignore it, standing on my own. He just had that hand wrapped around someone else, as irrational as it is, he's not touching me.

I turn my back on him and Dante, approaching Ollie. "I forgot my bag at the diner, I could really use a hot shower and a t-shirt to sleep in, if those things are available. I just need a corner to crash in." I let the exhaustion I'm battling seep into my tone.

Ollie bends his knees making us eyelevel; he searches my face then nods his head. "Everything can wait, come on." His arm goes around my shoulder, and I allow him to lead me down the hallway and up the stairs. He turns to the second door on the left, opening it and urging me to enter.

It's dark until he swipes his hand to the right of the entryway. A small overhead chandelier flickers to life, casting the room in a dim glow. Straight

ahead are two long windows reaching almost from floor to ceiling. The wooden casings are a dark wood, which matches the floor. Against the right wall is a bed a little wider than the one I have in the trailer, it's covered in a soft yellow and white quilt. There's a dainty white vanity with three mirrors against the same wall as the door to the hallway. To the left, there's a slightly ajar door and a sliding door that looks to be a closet.

I don't see any personal touches, no photos or knickknacks. It's just a spare room. I snort. It's nicer than anything I'll probably ever own, and it doesn't look like anyone has stepped foot in here in ages. "Do you not like it?" Ollie questions me.

"It's great Ollie, thanks."

He sounds unsure when he responds, "Okay, well the shower is right through there. I'll see what I can do about rounding you up something to sleep in."

I don't wait for any more instructions. Finding the light switch, I peer into a white tiled bathroom with a closed door opposite of the one I came in.

I start peeling off my clothes the second I see the shower. It's simple, something I expect to see in any nice hotel. A silver showerhead pokes out of the wall with a tub beneath, just in case you need a bath. I turn the left knob all the way and spin the right just a little, wanting the heat to wash away everything I'm feeling.

I haven't been in long when there's a light tapping on the door. "Yeah," I croak, my throat tight.

"Oliver said you needed something to sleep in." I cross my arms over my body, hiding, even though I'm behind the thick white curtain when I hear Ares's voice in the bathroom. He's the last person I want in here.

"I'll be right out... thanks," I mutter though clenched teeth. The door closes with a small click. I drop my forehead to the wall, letting the hot water beat on my back and neck. My hair is going to pay for this, there isn't any soap, shampoo, or conditioner in here, but at least I showered earlier. I was looking more for an escape than needing to get clean anyway.

Finally, I turn off the water, letting the cool air sting my skin as the water drips off my body. Opening the curtain, I find a fluffy black towel, a thick pair of gray wool socks, and a black t-shirt folded next to the sink. Pulling the towel from the bottom, I shiver as I run it over my hair. I can't help but look into the big mirror over the counter. My waist is a little more pinched in than usual and my cheeks look hollow. I haven't lost that much weight, but I look

a little sickly. The last few weeks have definitely taken a toll on me.

I wrap the towel around my chest after a brief pat dry and sit on the closed toilet lid. I can't find the energy to dress myself. I feel like if I walk out of this room, I'll have to deal with all the crap that's waiting for me.

Someone taps on the door again. "You okay in there?" Ollie's voice comes from the other door. He's a little easier to deal with and he's the only one of them that has been consistently kind to me.

"Yeah, I'm okay." I stand, knowing I can't stay in here forever. I debate putting my panties back on, but the thought skeeves me out. Shaking out the shirt, a warm musky scent fills the room. Bringing the fabric to my nose, I inhale. Either someone sprayed this shirt with cologne, or it's been worn. Ares couldn't even find me a clean shirt? I'm assuming it's his since he's the one who brought it to me. I almost drop it to the floor, but something stops me. I want to wear his shirt, I like that fact he had it on first—the realization pisses me off. But I slide the soft fabric over my head anyway. It falls to mid-thigh, concealing the fact I don't have any underwear on.

I wrap the damp towel over my hair then pile up my dirty clothes, preparing to leave the warm bathroom. A rush of cool air hits my face and bare legs the moment I open the door to the yellow room. I turn, intending to hang my clothes over the chair of the vanity. I'll need them tomorrow until I can retrieve my bag from the diner.

Gasping, I hold in a screech as I find Ares tucked into the corner, blending in with the shadows. "Why are you lurking in here? Come to make sure I'm not stealing the linens?" I snap at him, startled by his appearance.

"Milo said Maggie had a vision," he replies, ignoring my questions.

"Well then I'm sure he also told you I have no idea what she was talking about, or what it means."

"He did, but maybe Milo didn't ask the right questions."

I drop my bundle on the vanity, picking my jeans out of the pile. Shaking them out I drape them over the back of the chair, then move to my shirt to do the same. My bra and panties are balled up together, so I snatch them up to put under the shirt. "You got the right questions then?"

"Maybe."

I peer over my shoulder. Ares pulls away from the corner of the room, moving closer to the bed.

Spinning around, I glare at him with my arms crossed over my chest. "You want to holler at me until I remember more too? Go ahead."

“You’ll find I don’t do much hollering, as you call it. I find it unnecessary.” I snort, imagining that to be true. Ares has a look about him that makes you want to tell him what he wants to know before he even asks. “Oliver mentioned you were tired. Would you like to lie down?” Ares pulls the thick quilt out from under the pillows, revealing clean white sheets. What’s he up to?

Ares sighs. “You know, this must be some sort of payback for something we’ve done,” he mutters to himself, looking up at the ceiling with his hands braced on his hips. I lick my lips and tip my head, noticing he seems almost as confused as I am. I drop my arms thinking maybe I’m being a little harsh. This situation is new to all of us. I’ve been assuming, because they knew this might eventually happen, that they were better prepared for all the changes than I am. They are, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t struggling too. As a matter of fact, haven’t they told me exactly that more than once?

I let some of the anger and confusion fall away, making the decision to assist them with helping me understand what being part of their Infinity will mean for us. Now I just need to drop the jealousy I can’t seem to curb when it comes to the guys.

Taking a deep breath, I tug the damp towel from my hair, letting it fall to the floor before shuffling over to the bed. I pass Ares and climb into the sheets. A tapping on the door has us both looking in that direction. Dante pokes his head in after opening the door before either of us have a chance to respond. He looks from me to his brother, then pushes the door the rest of the way open and enters, heading straight for the end of the bed. Claiming a seat, he looks at Ares, waiting for his direction.

“Are the others coming?”

“Milo had to finish up a call, they’ll be right up,” Dante replies.

Ares nods his head and his lips harden into a thin line. “Listen, Laura, before they come up there’s something I need to say.”

“Ares...” Dante warns.

Ares looks at his brother. “Not everyone agrees with me that right now is the right time to tell you, but—”

“Try none of us agree,” Dante interrupts. My eyes volley between the two of them waiting to see what Ares is going to say.

“Well I think it will make everything easier once you understand a few things about how an Infinity works.” I nod my head eagerly, that’s what I want. Ares sits on the edge of the bed facing me. “Uh... so,” Ares stumbles

over the words. It's strange to see someone who has appeared so self-assured and confident stammer. Maybe I don't want to know what he's about to say. Ares takes both hands and scrubs them over his face. "I never thought I'd be explaining this to anyone," he mumbles to himself. "How old are you?" His eyes go wide, as if he's just now considering this.

"Seventeen, almost eighteen. Why?" What could my age have to do with what he's about to tell me?

Ares blows out a heavy breath. "Could be worse."

"Can someone please just tell me what's going on?" I'm getting frustrated again. Dante shakes his head but doesn't add anything. It's clear he thinks it's a bad idea.

"Well, usually—always, actually —Infinities are together," Ares finally says like that's some huge revelation.

"I already knew that," I say, looking between the two of them. Ares stands and begins pacing. His long legs eat up the space in the room with just a few strides.

"It's not usually that big of a deal when there's only three in an Infinity, but we have five."

"Yes, they told me our group is unusual. Does that make it harder or something, because there's only one of me and I'm the battery?" Ares snorts, putting his hand on the back of his neck.

"It is harder that there's only one of you and four of us, but not because you're a battery. If anything, you're like adding gasoline to a fire, we don't take anything from you. It's the other way around. You'll take from us. But make us stronger because it filters back like a loop." Ares stops mid stride. "I don't think I'm explaining this right, but that's not really important right now. What's important is that you understand that we," he makes a circle with his hand between himself and Dante, "will always be *together*."

"You've said that, so what are you really trying to tell me? Am I supposed to tag along with you guys all the time like some fifth wheel?"

Ares turns to face Dante and deadpans, "I get it."

"I told you, and you thought it would be easy."

"Well I was wrong," Ares responds, completely leaving me out of the conversation.

I throw my hands up in the air. "How am I supposed to understand any of this if you won't tell me?"

Ollie walks through the open doorway, taking a long look at Ares who

has resumed his pacing, and Dante sitting at the end of the bed. “What’d I miss?”

“Not a whole hell of a lot,” Ares mutters acerbically.

Ollie wastes no time walking over to the head of the bed and sits down next to me. I scoot over, tugging the sheet with me to give him more room. Taking advantage, he slides even closer and brings his legs up, stretching them out.

“Where’s Milo?” Dante questions, narrowing his eyes on Ollie. “And why did you give her the room next to yours?”

Ollie crosses his arms over his chest, peering at Dante with one raised brow. “Your room is two doors down Dante.”

“She should be downstairs,” Ares pipes in.

“You have the only room downstairs,” Dante snorts.

“Exactly,” Ares counters.

“Why don’t you just hide me away in the attic, or better yet, in the basement?” I argue as Milo finally comes in, catching the tail end of my snarky comment.

“Off to a good start I see,” Milo mumbles, pulling out the chair to the vanity.

Ares ignores his comment. “Now that we’re all finally here. Laura, ask us what you want to know.” That’s a loaded question. I want to know everything.

I swallow, unsure of what to ask first. I scan the four of them. Ollie relaxes next to me, his blond hair hanging loose around his shoulders. Dante is rigid, sitting at the end of the bed with his amber eyes trained on me. Milo is aloof as ever. He’s sitting in the chair across the room, he couldn’t make it more obvious if he tried that he’s keeping himself apart from us. And finally, Ares, he’s stopped pacing, but he’s still clearly agitated. His movements are short and jerky, his voice is tight.

“I guess the most important thing I need to know is what you all expect from me.” I place my hands in my lap waiting for a response.

Ares, the most vocal, opens his mouth, but Ollie beats him to it. “Expect from you? This isn’t a job interview Laura. You are part of us, part of our Infinity.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know what that means. You guys are together most of the time, what does that mean for me? I have to work, I have my mom...” I stop short of saying that I have to take care of her. Ares already knows that’s

not true anymore.

“We don’t always have to be together, like physically.”

“Really Oliver?” Ares comments in a flat tone.

Ollie’s cheeks go red and his nostrils flare. “That’s not how I meant it and you know it.” I look between the two of them, wondering about the undercurrent. Turning to look down at me, he adds, “We do end up spending a lot of time together, that’s part of why me and Milo end up staying here most of the time.” Ollie shrugs. “It’s just more comfortable.”

“Have you noticed when you’re not with us you might be more tired than usual, feel a little run down?” Dante runs his hand over one of the yellow squares on the quilt, flipping the nap of the fabric. I draw in a small breath, earlier tonight I felt exactly that. I thought I started feeling better after getting some food in my belly, but could it be more? Ollie and Milo did show up around the same time. Could what he’s saying be the real reason I haven’t been feeling great?

I lick my lips, afraid to admit it out loud so I nod instead. “So, you guys experience that too?”

It’s Milo who answers, “We didn’t, not until you came along.” He sounds bitter. I can hardly blame him.

NINETEEN

“Don’t make it sound like that Milo,” Ollie scolds. Turning to me he adds, “We started talking about this yesterday.” He nods checking to see if I recall, which I do. “Now that we’ve connected, the Infinity is doing what it’s supposed to do. Bind us together.”

“So, were not like... bound together now?” My voice is small, unsure.

“Not fully, no,” Ares intones.

Ollie lifts his arm and wraps it around my shoulder. “So, there’s still time to like, break it off if someone wanted to?” I glance over at Milo, and while I might secretly like the idea of being needed by not one person but several, he seems to hate the notion of me being part of his pairing.

“No.” Ares sighs looking away from me.

“That doesn’t seem right. If someone isn’t happy they shouldn’t be forced to be bound, or whatever.”

“You don’t want to be part of our Infinity?” Dante’s voice is quiet, sad even.

I meet his eyes. “It’s not me. I’m not completely convinced you guys aren’t all taking a walk in crazy town, but in case you hadn’t noticed, I don’t have much else going for me.”

“Why ask then?” Milo shoots back. My head goes back, is he serious?

“I asked because it’s pretty damn clear you can’t stand to be around me. You think I enjoy you treating me like I’m some step-sister who you don’t want around?” Milo’s face goes bright red and he pinches his lips together.

“You think I enjoy watching Ollie hang all over you?” He shoves his hand in my direction, feeling the weight of Ollie’s arm on the back of my neck. My body goes rigid.

“I thought he wasn’t your boyfriend?” I raise my voice, not liking the way he’s calling me out.

“He’s not,” Milo grinds out through clenched teeth.

“Then why the hell do you care?”

“Because I—”

“Hey, hey let’s not do this,” Ares interrupts when Milo stands up. Ollie drops his head on his shoulder, so our faces are close together. Milo bares his teeth in a sneer but doesn’t finish what he was about to say.

“Why don’t you let him finish, then I’ll know why I’m pissing him off.”

“It’s not you Laura,” Ollie whispers softly, his voice is almost sleepy. I look over at him and sure enough his eyes are closed, he looks completely content.

I wave my hand in Ollie’s direction. “Is he narcoleptic? I mean how can he be falling asleep right now?” I ask the others, wide-eyed.

Dante rubs his fingers over his bottom lip. “It’s you. When he’s touching you, he feels... good?” he offers with a shrug. He turns away, looking over at Milo. “It might help if he wasn’t so touchy yet, or if... if maybe he would share.”

My mouth pops open. “Share what exactly?”

“You,” Ares answers, leaning his back against the wall. He’s watching us from across the room from under his brow. I let my eyes roam over his features, his dark hair is pushed away from his face showing off the chiseled line of his jaw. The distance between us obscures the color of his eyes, making me wonder would I be able to see the burnished brown if I was close enough, or would they be dark as night? His lips are ever so slightly parted, hollowing out his cheeks. I watch as his tongue darts out, wetting his bottom lip. As I’m watching him his head leans back against the wall, opening his body up more for my perusal.

“Laura,” Dante calls my name, pulling my attention from the darkly handsome man across from me. I blink several times, having been completely derailed from my earlier question and Ares’s confusing answer.

“Sorry, what?” The quilt barely budes as I tug it up, trying to cover more of my body. I feel a flush of embarrassment that I got caught staring at Ares. All four of them have me totally disarmed. Dante lifts his weight off the bed, allowing me the barrier before settling again.

“I think it’s important to understand we all need to be close to you at some point.” Dante looks around at the other guys, making sure they agree

with what he's saying. "While we all agreed to let you have some time to grow used to the idea of... us. It seems Oliver is much further along in the bonding process than the rest of us." Dante lifts his hand and motions to his friend. Ollie's head is cradled on his shoulder, but it's leaning toward me, so much so his face is inches from the top of my chest.

Leaning forward so his arm slides down my back, his body goes with it. Falling into the space behind me. "Is he okay?" I turn so I can see him fully. Ollie curls in on himself, until his forehead meets my hip, wrapping himself around my back before falling still again.

"It's the connection." I look up to see Milo standing near the foot of the bed. His eyes are on Ollie, but he doesn't look angry, if anything I'd say he looks a little lost from the slight frown marring his face and his slumped postured.

Realization hits me, I bet that's exactly how I looked when I understood my mom was gone. "I won't take him from you," I blurt out. Milo's eyes find mine, he has a slight bit of scruff growing on his chin, the whiskers are a few shades darker than the caramel brown of his hair. "I know what that's like, and I would never take him from you." I focus on Milo, letting him see the truth of my words. I've been lost for the last few days, trying to understand why my mom left, where she could be. I don't want him to experience that same feeling of abandonment.

"It's all changing." Milo's voice is thick. I nod, understanding maybe for the first time that he's not really upset at me. I lift my arm and beckon him forward. Milo bites the corner of his lip but rounds the bed. His eyes never leaving mine. I scoot over again, sliding a leg out from under the blanket to give him room to lie down next to Ollie, but Milo places his hand on the other side of me, stopping me from moving all the way to the wall. He climbs over Ollie, and over my legs, kicking his shoes off as he does. Milo settles lying with his back against the wall, his hand reached out, over the pillows to land on Ollie's shoulder. His eyes close as he takes a deep breath. I'm caught in the middle with them on either side, and Dante down by my feet. I look around, surprised he accepted my offer so easily.

"We aren't going to be able to fight the connection," Dante announces.

"I never planned on it. The sooner the better," Ares replies, he hasn't moved from his place on the wall. I squint, wondering if my eyes are playing tricks on me, or if the shadows are clinging to him more than they were a few moments ago.

Ares should be over here with us. With that thought my heart rate picks up, which isn't normal. I look down at my lap, feeling guilty. I don't think the connection is the only reason I want them close to me. I'm going to have to get damn good at smothering the attraction I feel for all of them.

My thoughts scatter when I feel fingers graze down my forearm and onto my hand. I look over to find Milo's palm on top of mine. "This okay?" he mumbles, not really looking at me. Swallowing, I nod.

"So..." I clear my throat. "So why does the connection make Ollie so sleepy?"

"Think of it like his body's way of adjusting to the changes that are happening to him," Dante offers.

"Will all of you suddenly start falling asleep all the time?" I look over at Milo who seems to be growing more comfortable by the moment.

"Not necessarily. It could be different for each of us." Ares crosses his arms over his chest.

"There isn't like a standard or something? Just so I know what to expect?"

"No." Dante looks down running his fingers over the quilt. "It's different for us, we have so many in our grouping, and we can't really talk to anyone about it."

"Why?"

Ares steps forward, leaving the shadows to scatter against the wall like they were never really there. "We haven't announced that we've found you to the Collective." His steps are slow, measured, as he nears the bed.

My back stiffens; they're ashamed of me. I thought that might be the case, but the confirmation stings. "Because I didn't grow up like you guys did?" I shift, tucking my leg back under the covers.

"There's a lot about our situation we don't fully understand. I'd like to know what we're getting into before we announce ourselves as an Infinity." He doesn't think I'm good enough for them. I look away feeling small in so many ways. The doubt that I'm even what they claim settles on my shoulders. They keep telling me I belong with them, but in what capacity? When will I ever really understand what it is they say I am?

"It's all just circles." I pull my hand out from under Milo's and scoot forward kicking the quilt from my legs. I don't want them here right now, I don't even want to be here right now, I'd rather just be a home. "You guys keep promising to give me answers, but you never really do. You just keep

talking in circles. I think this is all some crazy load of shit.” I narrow my eyes. It isn’t a coincidence that we came here, and my mom goes missing right after some crazy boys start following me around. I make it to the edge of the bed, holding the long t-shirt down over my legs.

Crossing the room, I snatch my clothes from over the chair, clutching them to my chest before spinning around to face them. “Did you do something to my mom?” I seethe, angry that I keep letting myself believe their shit.

“Laura, what are you talking about? What could we have done to your mom?” Dante is looking at me like I have two heads, Ares tilts his head not saying a word.

“She’s always said people were out to get us. You guys barge your way into my life and she turns up missing days later?”

Dante stands. “Wait, your mom is missing? I thought you said she was sick?”

“She is sick... well I thought she was sick.” I point to my head. “But now I’m not so sure, maybe she knew exactly what she was talking about.” I back toward the bathroom door, intending to lock myself inside to get dressed.

“How long has she been gone?” Ares questions, his fingers tapping against the side of his leg. “And who did she think was after you?”

Narrowing my eyes at him I counter, “I’m not telling you shit. See how much you like being left in the dark.”

The top of Ares’s lip barely curls. “*Cara*, I’m very much at home in the dark.” His voice is light, but his eyes are intense. He’s staring at me like I’m the answer to a riddle he needs to solve. “The man from the campsite mentioned seeing her mother when she checked in, when did Laura start school?”

“Uh... three weeks ago, a few days after school started,” Dante answers quickly.

Ares takes a few steps in my direction, his eyes running from my damp tangled hair down to my bare legs. “You said yesterday you wanted proof you’re our match. I showed you my marking.” Ares eyebrows go up and I flush remembering.

“Where are you going with this?” I feel a tightness in my chest.

“Do you still want me to prove it?” The room seems to fall away as he gets closer. All I see is him. My breathing is choppy.

“How?” I peer at him sideways. Ares jerks his head toward the bathroom

door. “You want me to go in there?” I freeze. What if he’s telling the truth? Do I want to know? No, I don’t want to know, I *need* to know. Still watching him, I shuffle over to the open doorway. Using one arm I swipe the wall looking for the light.

“Here.” Ares pulls my bundle from my arm before I can protest and drops it carelessly on the floor. He ushers me into the room with his body. I back up enough that my hip hits the counter. My eyes are wide as I stare up to his face, and Ares wets his bottom lip, boxing me in so I’m pinned against him. Meeting my eyes, he calls out, “Do you have a small mirror in here, a shaving mirror?”

Shuffling footsteps alert me to the others’ presence. Glancing away from Ares, I see all three of them hovering around the open doorway. It’s Dante that answers, “Nah, I don’t think so. It’ll be over at the pad.” Ares steps back from me, flashing his eyes around the room, finally settling on the big mirror behind me above the sink. Taking a cue from him I turn, so I’m facing the large mirror as well. I watch as he moves in closer over my shoulder, his frame much larger than mine his eyes, like smoldering flames, have me so captivated I can’t look away.

Leaning down so his lips are near my ear he softly says, “I’m going to show you, but I’ll have to pick you up, so you can use the mirror.” My throat goes dry and I watch as my reflection nods her head. I wonder briefly why he can’t just tell me where to look, but the thought evaporates when Ares’s hands go to my shoulders. His long fingers spread wide, reaching my collarbones. He applies a slight bit of pressure, turning me to face him, and my brow furrows in confusion that he’s turning me away from the sink.

Ares bends his knees, his face coming closer to mine, and I hold my breath. His arm bands around my lower back as he tugs my body flush with his.

“Ah... what are you...” Milo’s question dies on his tongue as Ares hoists me up. If I thought our bodies were close before it was nothing compared to the crush I’m feeling now. My breath leaves me in a heavy whoosh as my hands fly up to his shoulders. Our faces are lined up perfectly. The black of his pupil begins to spread, and I swear the room goes a little fuzzy at the edges, the shadows chasing away the bright light of the recessed bulbs in the ceiling.

Ares’s eyes close heavily, and when they reopen it’s on a slow blink, his lashes lifting to reveal that the whites of his eyes are completely obscured by

inky blackness. In the depths I see myself, mouth faintly parted, my eyes torn wide as I gaze back at him.

Ares gives a barely discernable shake of his head, squeezing his eyes closed. Dante steps forward, placing a hand on his shoulder. “You were going to show us her mark,” Dante reminds Ares and me. I’ve been so lost in the last several moments it was easy to forget how I ended up in his arms in the first place.

With his eyes still closed and his teeth grinding, Ares grates, “Back of the thigh... high up.” Assuming my weight is causing the discomfort, I push off his shoulder with my hands and wiggle a bit, so he knows to set me down. The arm around my back tightens and my breath leaves in a wheeze. “Just look, please,” Ares demands.

Turning my head, I peer backwards at the mirror. I squeak and reach for the hem of the shirt, trying to pull it down when I realize the bottom of my butt cheek is visible, but I freeze. There, just below the swell, is a messy dark blot. I run my fingers over the marking, expecting to feel some difference, a rough texture or a slight raise, but it’s as smooth as the rest of my thigh.

I rub harder, imagining the color will smear away. I certainly don’t expect for Dante to grab my wrist, freezing me. I look down at him, he’s bent down low, examining the mark closely.

“When did you see this?” his fingers reach out to touch the spot he just stopped me from touching. When his hand makes contact, it elicits a completely different feeling. My body melts and until that moment I hadn’t realized how rigid I was in Ares’s hold. My head drops to his shoulder, and his other hand comes up to my head, cradling me into his neck.

“After the shower, I caught a glimpse when she was putting her clothes on the chair.” Ares’s voice is soft, completely different from the tight words a few moments ago. I’m scarcely aware of the others surrounding us. The feeling of comfort is unfamiliar, but not unwelcome. I feel like I just luxuriated in a warm bath, then had the best nap of my life. There’s no doubt or worry in the moment. I grab on with both hands and pull the feeling of contentment into my center. A tug on the bottom of the shirt reminds me I was a little more exposed than I’m used to, probably about the same amount most girls let hang out in a short pair of cut-offs, but still not usual from me. I’m still not bothered enough to unwrap myself from Ares, as a matter of fact my legs start to lift so I can wrap those around him too. He grunts removing his hand from my head to push my knee down. My feet hit the ground in the

same second.

Ares releases my back, but holds on to the top of my shoulders, good thing too, I'm feeling a little unsteady. "*Cara?*" I blink at him lazily, listing toward Dante.

"I think I'm like Ollie." My voice is slow and low, the words barely a breath. Ollie's head peeks over Dante's shoulder, his nose wrinkled. "I feel like a gummy bear." I try to shake out my hands, but they barely wiggle. Milo shoulders his way past the others, his face close to mine like he's inspecting me for something.

I'm not sure if he found what he was looking for, but one hand goes around my back as he leans down and scoops me up bridal style. I let my head lull on his shoulder taking a deep inhale, he smells good, a light sugary cologne. The protest I was building dies when he stalks out of the bathroom and deposits me gently on the bed, tugging the covers over me. My lips curve up. "You don't hate me."

Milo sits on the bed, his hip hitting mine. "Of course I don't hate you." His fingers brush some of the hair away from my face.

I turn on my left side. "I'm glad, you smell really good."

TWENTY

A hand on my back has me jerking upright. “I’m awake,” I blurt out, thinking I slept through my alarm. My head is a little foggy as I look around, my eyes still squinted with sleep. There’s a figure next to me, but it’s still gloomy and I can’t make out who it is. As my brain catches up with my body I realize I’m not at home, I’m in Dante and Ares’s house, in the yellow room.

“Sorry,” I whisper much more quietly. “I’m up.”

Ollie’s voice comes from the darkness. “It’s okay Laura, we just have school, we know you need to get your bag from Maggie’s so it’s still really early.”

I nod, licking my lips. My mouth is thick. I would give about ten dollars for a toothbrush right now. I haven’t had such horrible dental hygiene in... well ever that I know of.

With my palm over my mouth I ask, “Can I use the bathroom?”

“Dante put some stuff in there for you last night, take your time.”

I pull my legs free from the blankets, straightening the t-shirt before climbing off the bed. “Thank you, I won’t be long.” The door snaps closed behind me. There’s a new toothbrush still in its packaging, and a tube of partially used toothpaste on top of a folded washcloth. Glancing at the shower I see a single bottle of shampoo. My heart warms at their consideration. Picking up the blue toothbrush, I run my fingers over the casing. It’s something so simple, a nice toothbrush, I usually pick mine up at the dollar store a few at a time so the color doesn’t mean anything to me, except for the fact that it was probably one of theirs and a they gave it up for me.

“Ollie?” I call through the door.

“Yeah?” His reply is fast, from just the other side of the door.

“This is for me to use? I can open it?” My voice is unsure, it’s reasonable to assume it is, but I can’t bring myself to open the package without confirmation.

“What, the toothbrush?” Ollie sounds skeptical, like he thinks there might be something else in here I’m talking about.

“Yeah, I just wanted to make sure.”

“Laura, yes it’s for you. You don’t need to ask if there is something you need, hell—if there’s something you want, just take it, use it.” A thud sounds. I imagine Ollie letting his head thump on the door, he must think I’m being ridiculous.

“Okay.” My reply is soft, without conviction.

“Laura,” Ollie pauses, “at school today, you probably won’t see much of me, Dante, or Milo.” I halt, my hands freeze before turning on the faucet. Thoughts of last night in this very bathroom filter through my mind. There’s no doubting I do belong with them now, I’ve seen the evidence myself, but that doesn’t mean anything, nothing has changed. They’re still ashamed of me.

“Got it.” I force evenness into my tone. I’m not going to let him know their rejection hurts. “I’ll be out in a minute.” Turning the cold water on full blast, I look into the mirror. Still the same girl I saw yesterday in the community showers. Dull blonde hair, small nose, big eyes and lips. There’s a slight flush to my cheeks where the sting of embarrassment brightens my face. Ollie’s footsteps recede into the room. Using my fingers, I comb through my hair, forcing the lumps of snarls into submission as I pull it back, I know the loose ponytail I usually wear is out, it’s way too tangled for that. Sectioning it off into three parts, I tie it into a messy braid that falls over my shoulder because I haven’t mastered how to get it centered in the back when I’m doing it myself.

Peeking my head out the door, I find my clothes still heaped on the floor where Ares dropped them last night. Ollie steps forward and I notice he has a dark pair of sweatpants hung over his arm. “These will be too big, but it was all we could find. They are Dante’s from a few years ago.” I reach out to take the offering, wondering why they didn’t give them to me last night.

“Thanks,” I mutter, locking myself back in the bathroom. “Shit,” the curse fall from me when I remember I need my bra from the floor. I slide the pants on easily, they are incredibly soft on the inside against my skin. Ollie’s

right, they are too big, but only the length. The gathered waist sits on the swell of my hips just fine. Poking my feet out the holes in the bottoms so I don't step all over them, I open the door to find the room empty, and my clothes are gone from the floor. "Ollie," I call out urgently, needing to catch him.

Dante enters the room instead, his hair still damp from a shower. I shuffle, feeling awkward standing before him in his pants, especially after last night. All he did was brush his hand over the back of my leg and I was putty.

"Did you need something?" he steps more into the room.

"My stuff that was on the floor is gone."

Dante's eyes crinkle. "It was dirty right? Do the sweats not work?" He eyes my legs.

"No, the pants are good, thank you by the way." That stupid flush is back. "But my other stuff..." I let my words trail off. I don't want to bring attention to the fact that I don't have a bra or panties on.

"You can just wear Ares's shirt until we get your stuff from Maggie's, he won't mind." I cross my arms over my chest. My breasts aren't huge, but I haven't gone without a bra in years. Being bare in his pants is bad enough, but that's easy enough to conceal, whereas the bra will be super obvious if anyone of them cared to notice. Lowering my head, I nod, not meeting his eyes. I'm not willing to tell him what I need, so I'll deal with it until we get to the diner.

"Okay yeah that's fine, but I need my stuff back. I'll need to go to the laundromat today."

"Ollie probably already gave them to Gloria. You can just bring back whatever you need, and she can take care of it for you."

I glance at him from the side and a tightness rising in my throat. "Guess that's something that happens a lot around here." The words are uttered under my breath, but I know he has no problem hearing me.

"She's been picking up after all of us for years." Dante doesn't flinch at my implication. He must not realize I'm talking specifically about girls' clothes winding up in their laundry. It was only a few days ago I found the red panties in his little house across the driveway. My eyes narrow, I look down at the borrowed pants—are these really even his? If they gave me some random chick's clothes to wear I'm going to be pissed.

"Dante," Milo shouts from somewhere downstairs, his voice carrying up

to us.

“We’re coming,” he answers on a yell. Dante turns his back and jogs over to a room down the hall. When he returns he has keys in his hand. “Ready?”

Looking at my bare feet I want to tell him no, that I need socks and my underwear, but I take a deep breath, and feeling completely unprepared for the day ahead of me, I nod anyway.



I DON'T SEE ARES ANYWHERE WHEN THE BOYS HUSTLE ME OUT IF THE SIDE door where I left my shoes last night. Once we're in the car, I take a few moments to cuff the bottom of my pants so I won't have to keep holding them when I walk. If I thought no bra and panties were bad, it's nothing compared to the way my bare feet feel inside my dirty old sneakers. I wiggle my toes for the hundredth time, feeling the small little piles of fabric balled together on the insole of the shoes, and the crispy fake leather rubbing on my heels.

Milo grabs my hand, stopping me from finishing rolling the sweats. “You don't have socks on,” he announces like I didn't already know that.

“I know.” I pull my hand free, covering my ankle.

“Why?”

I huff out a breath. “Ollie took my stuff to give to Gloria apparently,” I drone, and it's clear I'm not happy.

Ollie turns to face me, a wince on his face. “I'm sorry Laura I didn't even think about stuff like socks and...” His eyes dip to my chest and I cross my arms quickly, but not quick enough. “Shit.” He jerks back around in his seat, facing the front. “I'm really sorry Laura.” He turns back to look at me, keeping his eyes focused on mine. “Do you have socks... in your bag?” His drawn out question making it obvious he wasn't only referring to socks.

Looking down at my lap my ears catch fire. “Yeah, it's fine,” I answer softly. The rest of the ride to the diner is quiet and Dante watches me in the rearview mirror way more than is necessary, but I continue to stare out the window pretending not to notice. Dante pulls around the back of the Diner and honks his horn twice before jumping out. Gus pokes his gray head out the door, my bag gets extended in his arms as it is handed to Dante. He jumps back in the car, passing the heavy sack over the driver's seat.

My mouth falls open, they aren't letting me go in to change? "Here, now you'll have socks," Dante rattles off, already driving away. "You could have just asked one of us for socks." He sounds slightly offended, like I did something wrong not asking him for socks.

Ignoring that I mutter, "I thought I'd be able to change there before school." My eyes follow the sign for the restaurant as we speed away.

"Milo has to see the coach before school, sorry we're in a hurry this morning, I didn't think you'd mind wearing that to school since you don't really dress up." Dante's words cut threw me, spoken so simply. He's right, I don't dress up. In fact, I make it a point to pick clothes that are as boring as possible, but showing up to school in sweatpants that are three sizes too big, with a shirt to match, will definitely not help me blend in. Everyone will notice I look like a clown.

"Oh my god." My words are a horror filled exclamation. I can't believe that's what they think of me. No wonder they're ashamed to admit I'm in their Infinity. If Dante thinks I would have no problem wearing this to school, he doesn't know me at all—my blood starts to heat. Did he ever once think I dress the way I do because that's all I can afford? I fist my hands, my nails biting into the soft flesh of my palms. I'm so angry I want to shout at him about the unfairness of his assumption. I seethe, my mouth pinched in a tight line, biting my tongue. Tears of unshed words prick at my eyes, but if I open my mouth I won't be able to hold back the venom I want to spew.

Grabbing my bag from the floor where it fell, I cradle it to my chest, completely shutting them out. Ollie tries to engage me several times, but he's easy to ignore. When the car stops I'm already sitting on the edge of my seat, ready to erupt from the backseat. If I could strip their shirt and pants from my body right now I would, but it's not worth walking bare ass naked into school just to show them how much I don't care about what they think of me.

Ollie calls my name a few times as I run away from the car. Dante parked in the back, so I'll have to run all the way around the school to find an open door. I don't stop. If I could keep running and go home I would, but I've already missed a day of classes this week. I don't need the school trying to notify my mom that I've been absent, only to find her gone.

The halls are empty as I make my way to the girls' bathroom. I barricade myself in the handicap stall. My back hitting the door while I pant out heavy breaths. I'm so not a runner, there's a stitch in my side, but it's not nearly as important as getting away from them. They make it seem like this Infinity

business is forever—how the hell am I going to survive them? I may seem naïve, but I won't put up with them treating me like shit. I'm not some doormat because I'm not rich, or the prettiest girl to walk the halls of Franklin High. Some of the anger fades, as a few tears splash down my cheeks. Sadness and the longing to belong replace the fiery emotion. I toss my bag against the flimsy pink wall dividing the stalls and it clunks to the floor. I'd rather have the anger any day.

I give myself five minutes of self-pity before digging out my clothes and changing for the day ahead.

Just like Ollie warned, I don't see the guys all day, not even in class. I don't know how they get away with skipping so much, but today I'm grateful I don't have to pretend I'm not hurt by them shunning me. Delaney gives me the stink eye a few times when we cross paths in the hall, but she leaves me alone for the most part like everyone else.



WALKING OUT OF SCHOOL AT THE END OF THE DAY I SPOT CHARLIE, THE GUY who unlocked my camper, chatting with a few people next to his old truck. He waves in my direction, and I glance over my shoulder, but realize it's me he's greeting. I give him a tight smile and a small wave back before heading down the sidewalk toward the diner. The sound of running alerts me to his approach, but I keep walking. I'm not going to be late to work. Even if my boss is kinda freaky in *a I know your future, but I can't tell you* kind of way. She's still Maggie, sweet Maggie who hired me when no one else would.

"Hey Laura!"

"Hi Charlie, how are you?"

He's breathing a little hard from jogging over to me, but he plays it cool, shoving his hand in his pocket. "I'm good. You headed home? I could give you a ride."

"No, I'm going to work, but thank you anyway." I wouldn't have accepted a ride from him anyway, but he doesn't need to know that.

"Oh, where do you work?" Charlie walks, keeping pace with me.

"Maggie's diner, just up the road."

His mouth falls open. "No shit, my grandpa goes in there all the time."

"I know," I mutter, remembering Mike told me that the night he unlocked

my door.

Charlie's head rears back, but a huge grin lights his face. "You do?"

"Chuck!" a friend hollers from the parking lot, distracting him.

I use it to dismiss him. "Listen, I have to run. See you later." I quicken my steps as he calls to me.

"I'll stop in to see you, we can grab that burger." His voice is full of confidence. I made a mistake, I shouldn't have told him I knew who his grandpa, now he probably thinks I've been asking around about him, that I like him. Great, just what I need, another boy in my life.



THE MOMENT I WALK INTO THE DINER WE'RE BUSY, CROSS-COUNTRY HAS MET A HOME and all the kids are piling in the door for a quick bite to eat before they head back to school. By the time they're filing out, the dinner rush is coming in. I don't have any time to worry about Charlie coming in for a burger, I'm way too busy keeping everyone's glasses filled while Gus cranks the tickets out of the kitchen, one after another. So, when he does show up around seven-thirty, I'm unprepared. I'd just returned from doing a quick bathroom check, and he was already seated at one of the tables.

"Hey," Charlie greets me with a soft smile.

"Oh hey." I scan the rest of the tables not meeting his eyes.

"Have you had dinner yet, do you get a break?"

I run my hands over my short apron, which holds straws and my order pad. "Not really, sometimes I'll grab a bite when we're not busy, but we've been slammed all night." I'm not hungry, I haven't been hungry all day, and the fatigue that hit me yesterday afternoon is creeping up me. If what the guys told me is true, it won't go away until I'm with them. That thought makes me a little angry.

"Well, do you think you could have a break now? Or I can wait until you get off if you can't." Charlie looks up at me. His face is a little soft around the edges. He doesn't have any of the intensity Ares throws off in spades, nor does he possess the masculine beauty Ollie has. He's lean, but his body isn't sculpted the way Milo's is, nor does he hold any of the attraction I've felt toward Dante since our first meeting. Charlie is safe.

I want to tell him 'yes, I'll have dinner with you,' just so I don't have to

be alone, but also because he doesn't want to be with me only due to some metaphysical connection between us. He's seen where I live, he might not understand it, but he didn't seem to judge me for it either.

"I—" My words get cut off when the jingle above the door alerts me to another customer. "I'll be right back," I amend before turning to the door. Ares is standing right at the entrance. His eyes flow over me slowly before landing on the table to my right. I snatch my hand back; I'd been resting it against the top of the booth near Charlie's shoulder without realizing it.

His eyes narrow then glide to the young man in the booth. His mouth turns down in a frown. Ares eats up the distance between us, stepping into my personal space. I lean back slightly when he dips his head close to mine and inhales deeply.

Embarrassment floods me. Do I stink? He steps back quickly but places his arm around my waist in a way that makes us seem very familiar. Charlie hasn't spoken a word, nor have I. I'm not sure what to say. My mouth opens a few times only to close.

"Hello *Cara*," Ares finally purrs, his mouth close to my ear. I swallow thickly. When is he going to learn my name is Laura? "Been a busy night, how's Maggie? And you are?" His free hand shoots out to Charlie, who is sitting at the table as dumbstruck as I am at Ares's approach.

A few seconds pass without Charlie responding before he finally catches on and meets Ares's hand for a handshake. A firm handshake if the wince on his face is any indication. "I'm..." He says in a rather high pitch, so he clears his throat before saying, "I'm Charlie, Laura and I go to school together."

Ares looks down at me with a darkness in his eyes I don't understand. "Then you must know my brothers?" I wrinkle my nose at the slip, only one of the guys is his brother. "Dante, Oliver, and Milo."

Charlie peeks at me, then over to Ares who still has his arm around my waist. "I know who they are." Ares's fingers tighten on my shoulder as he pulls my side tightly to his. He leans in close to Charlie, like he's about to tell him something important. The shock of seeing him and feeling like I was caught doing something wrong finally wears off and I blurt, "Do you know what you want to order?"

My voice comes out loud as I shrug out of Ares's embrace. "You can find a seat at any of the open tables, I'll be right with you." I dismiss Ares, focusing on Charlie as I pull out my order pad with shaking fingers. I don't know what was about to happen, but it feels like I just took a bone from a

Rottweiler.

Ares, however, isn't as easily detoured. His large hand goes to the back of my neck, his fingers are gentle as he touches his mouth to my ear. Charlie watches the exchange, his eyes wide as they volley back and forth between us. "I'm not very patient." I swallow when I feel the heat of his breath caress my ear. He stalks away, but only a few feet. He leaves one empty both between him and Charlie.

"I'm going to assume you can't have a break now, since you have... other customers."

My eyes dart over to Ares, he's looking over the plastic menu from the table, pretending he's not listening to Charlie's hushed words.

Rolling my lips in I shake my head in denial. "Can I get you anything?"

"I mostly just stopped by to say hello," Charlie answers while sliding out of the booth. He quickly glances over at Ares, then back to me. "I'll catch you at school tomorrow." He walks out the door without another word.

My shoulders slump, now it's just Mr. Impatient and me. I pivot on my toes, narrowing my eyes on Ares. He looks completely at ease. The menu is left forgotten on the table with his hands folded neatly on top. I stalk over to him. "Why did you go all dark 'n' creepy?"

A snort betrays his calm features. "Dark and creepy?" Ares's lips lift in an infinitesimal smile before he smothers it away like it was never there. "Your friend didn't stick around?"

I roll my eyes, like that's a surprise. "Are you ordering?" Glancing at the neon clock behind the counter I see the kitchen closes in about twenty minutes. Ares ignores my dry tone and eye roll, opting to pick up the menu again, studying what I'm sure he already knows by heart.

"What would you suggest?" He's playing it cool. I watch as his eyes scan the menu from top to bottom and side-to-side, when I don't answer he drops it back on the table. "Have you eaten?"

"Not yet. We've been busy."

Ares's head tilts as he examines me. I wipe the front of my shirt, making sure it's straight before adjusting my apron. "We have a roast at home," he says softly. I feel a pang in my stomach and now that we're discussing food I'm hungry. I refuse to admit his presence has anything to do with the sudden appearance of my appetite.

I bite my lip, I haven't had a decent roast in ages. Sometimes I buy the Dinty Moore canned stuff from the grocery store, but that can't compete with

a real roast, smothered in gravy with sweet carrots and starchy potatoes. My mouth waters at the visual I'm creating.

I feel a gentle tug on my fingers where Ares wraps his pinky over mine. "You're hungry." His voice is barely a whisper. I don't even really think he was talking to me, more just an acknowledgement to himself. "Maggie!" His loud voice now carries through the diner.

I drop his hand, stepping back. My eyes now glued to the swinging door that separates the kitchen. She's been back there for a while now and I'm surprised she hasn't been out to check on me. The diner was empty when I went to inspect the bathrooms before Charlie showed up anyhow. The door pops open a few seconds later, and Maggie gazes at Ares. I expect an easy smile, but instead she her eyes dart around the room, confirming we're alone before she pushes the rest of the way through the door.

"What are you hollering for? You know where to find me."

"Laura hasn't eaten." Ares's voice is just as accusatory as Maggie's, but he adds a raised brow to the challenge.

"Last I looked she seemed damn capable of taking care of herself." Maggie's tone cuts through the air. I've never heard her sound so irritated.

Ares stays seated, but stares up at the older woman. "Her bonds are forming." That's the only explanation he gives.

Maggie clicks her tongue, her eyes soften when they land on me. "Why don't I have Gus box you up a big slice of that lasagna you love so much?" I flush under her insistence. I haven't had anyone worrying over me in a long time, if ever.

"Sounds wonderful," I tell her, even though the roast that Ares offered sounded even better, but I can't refuse her.

Maggie hustles back to the kitchen, not giving Ares another look. "Is she mad at you?" I whisper, wondering why their exchange was so strained. They both seem genuinely pleased to see each other just the other day.

Ares stands, adjusting the cuffs of his navy shirt at his forearms. "I suspect she is." He sighs, glancing at the door she disappeared through.

"Why, what'd you do?" I grab the cleaning towel from the bleach bucket and begin wiping down the tables.

"I may have stopped by here earlier today with hopes of getting some more information out of her about her premonition." Ares rolls his shoulders a bit. His shirt flexes with the movement, clearly tailored because it forms to him perfectly. His pants are a deep maroon, falling just to the top of a pair of

black wingtip shoes.

“What do you do, I mean for a job?” I spout before thinking.

Ares pauses. “Why, are you actively seeking new employment?” His brow kicked up again, somewhat mockingly.

I cross my arms over my chest and jut my hip out. “Why, you hiring?”

His eyes flare as he takes a few short steps in my direction. “I could definitely be persuaded to take on some new help.” Ares encroaches in on my space. I remember the feel of him holding me last night. They way my legs wanted to wrap around his tight waist. My heart rate picks up as his fingers glide under my chin, lifting my face up. The moment I had in the car with Milo, when I thought he was going to kiss me, filters through the back of my mind. Our faces were close together, like Ares and I are now. I roll my tongue over my lips. Ares pulls in a deep breath, his eyes closing as he leans in closer.

“Here you go...” Maggie’s voice trails off, leaving silence in its place. Thank god my back is to her, she may assume we were kissing, which I think we would have if she hadn’t walked back in. But at least she can’t see the fire glowing on my cheeks, or the way my hands are trembling at the loss.

“Thank you Maggie,” Ares replies for me, regaining his composure much quicker than I could.

“I had him throw in a few extra slices of bread too, make sure you eat it tonight.” Her tone is soft, she doesn’t seem upset with me. “Go on home now, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“But I haven’t mopped the bathrooms yet.” Ares walks past me. I hear the rustling of a paper bag then he returns and places his palm on my lower back, urging me forward.

“It can wait Laura,” she responds.

I’m too embarrassed to fight Ares as he ushers me to his black Range Rover. Glancing up at the large windows, I see Maggie inside with her face in a deep frown and her eyes unfocused as she stares into space. At least the white isn’t clouded them.

Peeking over at Ares as he adjusts in his seat, ∞ ∞ ∞ ∞ ∞

I want to ask him if he thinks Maggie will be mad at me because of what she saw us almost do. But trepidation has me biting my tongue—what if he really wasn’t going to kiss me like I’d imagined? How do I even begin to

understand these confusing boys and the attraction I feel from them? Is it all just the connection we share making me want things from them that never once crossed my mind before? Sure, I thought at some point when I was out of school I might find someone to be with, but I've been so consumed with taking care of my mother and keeping a roof over our heads to ever give the idea any real attention.

Now thoughts of all four of them consume my days. What would they think if they knew I was feeling this way, and about all of them? I lower my head feeling ashamed of myself. They treat each other like family, when I look at any one of them, brother is the last thought I have.

"Seat belt," Ares orders, turning the small dial to the R and backing out of the parking space. The smell of garlic and red sauce fills the interior of the car, my stomach growls, reminding me that I do in fact need to eat.

"Where are we going?" My eyes turn to the left, the direction of my camper, but Ares goes right instead. "I can't keep staying over. I need to go home, my mom... she might come back."

With one hand on the wheel, and the other resting on the center console, Ares looks over at me. "How long has she been gone?" His question is spoken softly, like he's coaxing a timid cat out from under the bed.

Sighing I tell him, "Almost a week."

"Has this ever happened before? Does she take off for a few days once in a while?" His fingers tighten on the steering wheel.

Glancing out the window into the darkness I shake my head in denial, "Never, she barely left the trailer. I have no idea where she would even go. She doesn't talk to anyone, and she has no one but me."

I feel the pressure of Ares's palm on my thigh. "I'll see what I can do to figure out what's going on. Do you have a picture of her?"

Wrinkling my nose I think about the one I have tucked away. "It's old, probably from before I was born, but it might help. She looks the same, but different."

"How do you mean?" Ares goes unnaturally still, his question is articulated with a forced lightness, but he's awaiting my response.

"It's hard to say, but she doesn't really look older." Now that I'm actually thinking about it, why did I never think it was strange that my mom didn't seem to change? "She used to... I don't know, it sounds silly to say aloud. But when I was younger, I used to think she shined, you know? She was so pretty, so full of life." Ares's hand, still on my leg, squeezes before his thumb

makes a few lazy circles on the outside of my thigh.

“And now?” he prompts when I don’t finish.

Crossing my arms over my stomach I huff. “Now she doesn’t. She hasn’t for a long while.” Ares comes to a stop at a red light, looking in both directions he spins the wheel like he’s going to make a left turn but makes a U-turn instead.

“If you want to stay at your place, I’ll stay there with you.” Ares pauses before adding, “My brothers will probably show up too.”

“That can’t happen. If my mom did come home and found you guys there she would...she would lose it. She doesn’t do well with people. She thinks everyone is... is like bad... out to hurt us,” I stammer, trying to come up with the right words to describe my mother and her mania. My heart rate doubles just thinking about her reaction. She would kick them out, and we would leave town before I could even tell them goodbye. I get a heavy tightness in my chest when I think about not seeing them again. It may just be the bonds, or our connection, but the thought alone is crippling.

“Then it looks like you’re coming home with me then. Laura, I know this isn’t the life you expected. I know all this must seem crazy to you, but we need each other. All of us.” My name on his lips sends a flutter of excitement to my stomach. Ares looks over at me, his eyes glowing from the lights on the dashboard.

I want that, I want to be needed, hell—I’d loved to be taken care of, even for only a little bit. Just long enough so I could let go of some of the doubts and worries I’ve been clutching for so long. But I also want them to *want* me to be there. I don’t want to be the person they hide from everyone else. I don’t want to have to question myself so much around them. I find myself wanting to push them away, just to see what it would take for them to leave me, and praying they don’t.

“It’s hard. I don’t really know where I stand with all of you,” I finally tell him as he turns into the lot at Turtle Creek. His car is quiet but the rocks under the tires still pop as he glides to the back of the park. My camper sits alone, no lights illuminating the path, with only the flare of Ares’s headlights to guide us.

Before the car is even in park, I release my belt and have a hand on the door handle. I’m not sure why he brought me back here, when he just said he was taking me with him. But I need out of the car anyway, I want out of the forced intimacy the supple interior provides. I want to breath air that isn’t

tinged with his cologne and food making, both my mouth water.

“*Cara* wait,” he calls with his door open but the engine still running. Ares jogs up to my side, halting my hand as I’m about to place the key in the door. He nudges me to the side so he’s the first one through the door and the hot air hits my face like a blast. I groan, the cooling unit must be broken again, because I know I left it on. I was rushing to get out of here yesterday.

I flip the toggle switch to the left of the door and the small light above the dinette flickers to life. Ares is a few steps ahead of me, his eyes scanning everything visible, which is most of the RV. He strides to the driver’s area, tugging back the heavy curtains. After a brief search he turns to face me.

With his attention wholly on me I shuffle my feet, running my hands over my hips. Stopping at the apron, I look down and untie the strings, pulling it free. It’s strange how having him here makes the place I’ve always called home feel so much smaller than it ever has. Even with him standing across the room he’s still so close. Ares’s head lowers and he’s still staring at me from under his brow as he saunters up to me.

“Um... do you want something to drink?” I blurt out as he nears. Ares bites the corner of his lip and shakes his head. When he releases his lip his tongue darts out, licking over his bottom lip. My heart stutters, then thuds to life with a heavy beat. Backing up, my rump hits the kitchen counter. He follows and I tip my face up, watching his approach. He stops when his body is just a hair’s breadth away from mine.

Now, that tiny distance seems like too much. I find myself wanting to lean forward, to breach the last of the space between us. “Oh *Cara*,” he purrs, placing one hand on the crook of my neck. His thumb runs from the bottom of my jaw down my throat and I swallow. Ares’s eyes search mine. “I should have let one if the others come.” His words are spoken softly, his thumb caresses the hollow of my throat and sweeps back up to my jaw. “I have no desire to deny myself.”

“Deny yourself what?” I breathe, my body leaning toward his without my permission. I feel like I’m playing a dangerous game, but it doesn’t stop me. I think the payoff will be well worth the price.

Ares’s hands go to the counter on either side of my hips as he leans his body into mine, pushing me against the counter. Dipping his head, his lips are barely touching the apple of my cheek and his nose traces along my temple and hairline.

“This *Cara*... this never ending pull that makes me want to carve a hole

in my chest so I can carry you there.” His words should frighten me, and if I’m honest they do, but not the way it should. I feel the slight pressure of his lips as he plants a tiny kiss right next to my ear. A shiver works its way over my skin, making the hair on my arms stand. “Are you okay?” Ares’s question forces me to examine whether or not I am. His nose runs down my cheek, stopping at the corner of my jaw. “*Cara*, tell me if this is okay?” His words vibrate over his lips and onto my neck.

“Are you allowed, I mean is it okay? I don’t know what rules there are—”

Ares stops my babbling when he lightly brings his lips to mine. He doesn’t move, just presses them on mine gently. I think he’s giving me time to adjust, or to push him away. My lips part as a weighty sigh escapes and my muscles go slack. It’s only him and the counter behind me, keeping me upright.

Ares groans, his hands reaching up for my neck as he moves his lips against mine for the first time. “My brothers will kill me, but I don’t care. I can’t help myself.” I feel the tip of his tongue roll over my bottom lip. I mimic the movement on instinct, my tongue tracing the same path as his. How can it feel so different when he does it? I must lick my lips a hundred times a day, but it has never felt like that. Ares pulls back, resting his forehead on mine. Our noses brushing together as I pant, and he nuzzles me.

“The others, they’ll be mad?” My fingers circle his wrists as I let my hands glide up his forearms, stopping when I reach the cuff of his shirt. I tease the smooth skin there, letting my fingertips delve under the fabric to his inner elbow before I drag my nails back down softly. I hear Ares swallow a gulp.

“Definitely,” he purrs. My eyelids low, I see his lips just inches from mine. I want to know what it would feel like to have him really kiss me. Lifting my chin, I bring our mouths closer together resting my lips on his. With the very tip of my tongue I trace just under his top lip. Ares’s hands tighten on my neck, almost to the point of pain, before he releases and flows his fingers over my shoulders and down to my waist. Gripping me, he lifts me so my butt is on the tiny kitchen counter. My arms go over his shoulders as he parts my legs, stepping even closer.

Ares angles his head low, his nose nudging my collarbone. My head falls back, allowing him better access as he runs the tip of his tongue up the column of my throat. “Oh hell,” I moan huskily when his teeth nip my jaw line. His fingers tremble as his palm finds my cheek. His forehead meets

mine again, and I let out a huff of disappointment.

Rocking back and forth across my brow he mutters under his breath, too low for me to hear. It's like he's working himself up to it, and that thought splashes cold reality over me. My hands go from pulling toward me to pushing him away. Ares leans away, his eyes fully black and his mouth parted as he searches my face. Whatever he sees there has him stepping back, scrubbing his hands over his face. "Forgive me *Cara*, I was lost in the moment." His words are formal and stiff. I hop down from the counter, my fingers covering my lips.

"It was me, I'm sorry. You don't have to... I don't want to make you feel like... I'm sorry this bond is so different. I feel different than I ever..." Heat rises from my chest and up my neck, landing on my cheeks. Ares takes a step toward me with his arm outstretched, but I spin in the other direction, heading to the curtained off area that makes up my room.

Dropping to my bed I bend forward, burrowing my face in my knees. What was I thinking? He told me it was wrong, that the others would be mad, but I still wanted it. Still do, if the quiver in my stomach and the tremor in my hands are telling me anything.

Sitting upright, I tell myself it's no big deal. Girls probably throw themselves at him all the time; he's probably kissed tons of them. I feel an actual pain in my chest when I imagine him doing just that. Shaking away the image, I run my hands over my thighs a few times. I'm not even really sure why he brought me here—to grab my stuff?

A few moments pass before I hear and feel his steps as he nears my room. He's hesitant, walking slowly. Not meeting my eyes, he tells me, "The guys called, are you about finished up?"

Taking my cues from him I stand, feeling awkward about the moment we shared. "What should I bring?"

He looks around my room and the corners of his eyes crinkle when he winces. "Anything you want to ke—" He stops mid sentence. "Have for a while?" His voice lifts at the end, telling me he's not sure himself. "And the picture," he adds, sounding much surer of himself. "Don't forget the picture."

TWENTY ONE

Walking in the same side door we used yesterday, I toe off my sneakers. The house smells divine with the aroma of roasted meat filling the air. Ares is a step behind me and his palm meets my back when I don't step out of the little room immediately. He guides me down the hall, past a few doors, and into the kitchen.

The rest of the guys are all seated at an island facing the stove. Each of their heads turn in our direction. Tangling my fingers together I wait, feeling unsure of where to go, or what to say.

Ollie hops out of his chair with a wide grin on his face. He rushes toward me, not stopping until I'm wrapped in his arms. Mine hang limply at my sides, completely taken aback by his greeting, I freeze. He pulls back but his hands are still on my arms as he peers down at me. "Hungry?" I nod remembering the lasagna in the car. "Good, come eat." Not releasing me, Ollie tows me to the island, pulling out the seat he vacated and gesturing for me to sit.

What will they think about how Ollie is treating me? I glance around without really looking at anyone. "My food's in the car."

"I got it," Ares replies, turning to leave without another word.

"How was Maggie's, busy?" Milo leans past Dante, his arms folded on the table, an empty bowl pushed away from him.

"Pretty steady. What... what have you guys been up to?" I try for casual. Hoping to find out why they weren't in school today. That's a normal question right? Something a friend would ask?

"Dante had to work on some yearbook stuff, and Milo had football." Ollie rolls his eyes. "I've been Ares's bitch all day." He leans his hip on the

counter, his eyes on me expectantly.

Ares returns, nudging his way between Ollie and me. He sets the bag on the counter, removing the boxes inside. I scoot my stool a little closer to Dante, giving him more room. He opens each box, peering inside before finding what he's looking for. Ares turns, boxes still in hand, and moves over near the dishwasher.

"That smells like lasagna," Milo perks up, watching Ares move about the kitchen. My eyes track him too. He opens a cupboard and grabs a dish, then pulls open a drawer, placing a fork and knife on the edge of the plate. The room is silent as Ares moves to the fridge with a tall glass in hand. "Milk?" he calls out, spinning to face me. His brow furrows when he finds us all staring at him.

"Me?" I squeak when I realize he's asking me if I want milk. My nose wrinkles. "Nooo. The only milk I drink is chocolate."

"What would like?"

I lick my lips, the others are still silent. "Water is fine. Thank you," I add at the end softly. When Ares's back turns to us again, Ollie mouths the words *what the fuck*, his eyes huge.

Pushing his way between Dante and me this time, Ares presents my lasagna and bread on a fine white plate, along with a tall glass of ice water. He watches me, his eyes running over my features, stopping on my lips.

"Thank you." My voice comes out small, no one has served me or taken the time to make sure I eat in ages. Years ago, when my mom wasn't so withdrawn, she would make us little dinners, but I took over that duty by the time I was eight. Ares turns to move and I reach out for his arm, stopping him in place. Meeting his eyes, I tell him, "No really. Thank you." He leans down and places a gentle kiss on my temple, then he's gone.

"Who was that?" Milo whispers once Ares has been gone a few seconds.

Feeling defensive, maybe even protective, I mumble, "I think it was very thoughtful." I tug the plate closer while picking up the fork and knife, slicing into the thick layers of meat, cheese, and pasta. I can't help the moan that escapes my lips as the first bite melts in my mouth.

Ollie clears his throat. "Remember to feed her," he says, like he's making a list of how to care for an animal. I want to glare at him, but my food is way too good for me to be bothered at the moment by his antics.

The guys start up quiet conversations around me, not really talking about anything important, just little things about school or their schedules. My eyes

grow heavy as my belly fills, the fact that it also coincides with Ollie finding a way or reason the touch me almost the entire time isn't lost on me, but I'm choosing to ignore it. I feel a closeness to him that I haven't yet explored, but he feels safe in way that Ares never would.

Pushing my plate away still half-full, I let my palm cradle my cheek. My eyes land on Milo as he explains something to Dante, both of his hands move as he demonstrates some maneuver. His eyes are lit with interest, his words rushed with an edge of excitement. I like seeing this animated side of him, he's been so moody and serious the past week so I never know what's up or down with him. Milo bumps his shoulder into Dante, grinning about whatever he's telling him. His smile is contagious. I grin, wondering what he's like on the football field.

Dante's head nods while he listens to his friend and my gaze is drawn to the wide leather cuff on his wrist. The black lines barely visible from beneath intrigue me. With Ollie's heat pressed to my side, I lift my free hand up and the tip of my nail traces the outline on Dante's wrist.

Dante's head snaps around in my direction. His body going rigid, I freeze. It seems I'm having a hard time controlling my impulses as of late. Biting my lip, my eyes rise to meet his. "Can I see this?" Dante swallows, his eyes going a little wide. I snatch my hand back. "I'm sorry, it's just... I feel like I need to see it. Do you know what I mean? It's okay, I won't ask again."

I begin stepping down from the stool, but just as my feet touch the floor Dante places his arm behind me, cutting off my exit. "You can see it Laura, I just wasn't expecting that. It's okay, really."

Feeling like I've violated some unwritten rule, I place my hand over his, which is working the leather strap free from the closure. "Seriously, you don't need to if it's private, like your girlfriend's name or something. I didn't mean to intrude on your personal life." I run my hand over my braid, pulling away from him. "I was just curious. I noticed it in art class a while ago, that's all."

"It is private, but not from you. It's my identifier." The band falls free from his wrist into his other hand and I get my first glimpse of the entire mark. My hand reaches out immediately to run along the edges, I stop just short of touching him. My eyes leap to his, the question of whether or not I can die on my lips when he extends his arm out to me. A look of anticipation on his face.

"Most marks are easily concealed, like ours," Milo offers, coming to

stand on the other side of Dante. He eyes are glue to where my fingers hover over Dante's wrist. What felt like a compulsion now feels like I've put us both on the spot with the brush of Ollie against my back and the way Milo seems so interested.

My mouth suddenly dry, I lick my lips, letting my fingers brush over the mark. It's smaller than Ares's, but no less riveting. His skin is smooth, but I swear I get that same feeling of velvety fur under my fingers. Dante's shoulders roll as his head goes back, a heavy sigh falling from his lips. I step closer, invading his space, and I want to run my nose up his neck and bury my face in his hair.

My fingers circle his wrist, not willing to release him, as my head falls to his chest with my ear over his heart. A rumbling flows from him, almost sounding like a low growl.

The clicking of heeled shoes echoes from an adjacent room. Ollie pulls me back from Dante, and my hand around his wrist is the last part of me to let go. Ollie steps away from me, going over to the fridge and pulling out a can of soda. I wrap my arms over my stomach; it's obvious they don't want whoever is coming to know what just happened. Dante turns from me, fumbling to replace the bracelet.

The same brunette from yesterday morning enters the room, the rhythm of her steps falter as she spots me. "Hello again." Her eyes are shrewd as she looks me over.

Still standing I shuffle my feet. "Hello." My voice is barely a whisper.

"We haven't been introduced, I'm Mia." She extends her hand out to me after making her way over.

Reaching out I take a hold of her hand, giving her a quick firm jerk of a handshake. Her eyes trace between mine as she inspects my features. "How long have you known the boys?" The barely there lilting accents softens her words.

"Not long." I glance over at Dante and Milo, both of whom are facing away from me, not giving me any indication on how I should respond.

"You must be pretty close, you were here... yesterday afternoon, right?" Her question seems innocent, but I can feel the probing nature.

Ollie interrupts before I have to answer. He wraps his arm over Mia's shoulder, much like he's done to me several times, pulling her attention to him. "Ares hasn't let you leave yet. He's had you here all day."

A sour taste fills my mouth. I want to disappear from this room, more

importantly, from hearing this conversation. A small smile lifts Mia's lips at the mention of Ares. "What can I say, he's lost without me."

"I'm going to take Laura home," Dante throws out conversationally.

Mia shifts so I'm back in her direct line of sight, but her eyes land on Dante. "I just left Ares' room, he said you guys had plans this evening." She delivers like a subtle reminder.

Dante straightens. "Yeah she needed a ride home from the diner. I promised Maggie we'd help out driving her home since she doesn't have a car. Ares knows I won't be long." My lips tighten into a hard line. I've been firmly placed in the same category as the help and I'm an unnecessary obligation to a family friend.

Mia tilts her head, looking at nothing in particular. "I haven't seen Maggie in ages. Will you tell her I said hi? I'll stop in and see her when Ares gives me a second to breath." Her words are filled with exasperation, but her face tells me she loves every second of being needed.

"Sure," I mutter, wondering why they even brought me here if they were just going to take me back home an hour later.

"Later Mia." Dante waves over his shoulder, and I follow along behind him expecting to head toward the mudroom where my shoes are. Instead, he trails through the house until I'm in a familiar open hallway. Ares's door lies closed a few feet in front of Dante. He raps on the door quickly before opening it and looking behind him to make sure no one is around.

He pushes the door open and ushers me inside, closing the door behind us. There's a dim light coming from a lamp by beside the bed. The textured gray walls seem to absorb more of the light than the small fixture throws off. Most of the room is cast in shadows, hinting at what might lie just out of sight.

I cross my arms over my stomach. "Why am I here?" I can't keep the contempt from my voice.

Dante's voice is pitched low when he answers, like he thinks someone might overhear him. "I'll have to leave for a little bit. I don't have another excuse for why you'd still be with me when I come back."

"Then don't make one."

Dante looks around, his hands raised in question. "Don't make an excuse? Then why else would you be with me?"

His words shatter the anger I was feeling, leaving behind only the painful reminder I still don't belong. Shrinking in on myself I mutter, "Wow, that's

harsh.”

The lines in Dante’s brow deepen, his eyes jumping around. “What? Never mind, we can talk about this later, just wait here. Someone will come for you in a little while.”

Realizing his intent to leave me here I jump into action, grabbing his arm as he turns back for the door. “Wait.” Now I’m whispering. “What if she comes back in here and sees me?”

“In Ares room? She would never look for you here.”

“I didn’t say she would be looking for me.” My hands go to my hips and I glare at him.

Dante shakes his head. “You don’t have to worry about that. Ares must have sent her out for the night, or she never would have been in the kitchen.” Pulling his phone from his front pocket Dante checks the screen. “But it’s late, she just got back to town so she’s probably staying here until they get her sorted.”

I clench my teeth, jealousy warring with anger. “That’s what I’m talking about. I don’t want her to find me in Ares’s room.”

“Laura, she won’t come back here tonight. Ares wouldn’t allow it.” Now I’m the one confused. “Just go sit on the,” he looks around the sparsely appointed room, “bed or something. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He’s gone before I have another chance to object. “Jerk,” I mutter to the closed door. Throwing my hands wide and my head back at the ceiling in exasperation, I fight the urge to scream at the frustration coursing through my veins. I spin instead, looking for something I can throw against the wall. The bed is the only real furnishing in the room, even the lamps on either side of the bed are built right into the wall, so I stalk over to the bed and snatch a heavy feather filled pillow and launch it at the wall of curtains on the opposite side of the room. It thunks to the floor before reaching its destination. I growl then stomp over to pick it up, squeezing it in both hands I bury my face in the dense fluffiness and let out the scream I so desperately need to free.

“What has you all riled up *gattino*?” Ares’s low voice startles me enough I let loose a real scream. My body wilts, exhausted by the constant upheaval of emotions. One look at my face and he’s walking over, a slight frown marring his features. “What’s wrong?” Ares’s eyes search mine, and I roll my lips to keep the words I want to say from escaping. If they hide me away now, what will they think if they know how much I crave touching them?

How I can't even be in a room with them without wanting to have them surrounding me? And it's not just one of them. I want all of them in the same way. It's harder to hide when it comes to Ares, because everything about him screams sensual. It's like his eyes are begging me to touch him right now.

I spin away from him, letting myself drop to the bed. In that moment I make the decision to tell him some of what I'm feeling. I can't meet his eyes when I say, "I think our connection, our Infinity, whatever you what to call it, is broken."

Ares folds himself next to me, his feet bare stretching out much further than my own. My eyes travel up over the light gray pants he's wearing and past the thin black t-shirt to his face. His hair is wet, curling at the end where the water is still pooling off the tips to land on his shoulders, the dark fabric concealing any of the moisture that falls.

"I really don't think that to be true," he holds up his hand to stop me when I would interrupt him, "but tell me *Cara*, why you think it is."

"I know you know my name is Laura." Ares hides a grin, smothering it with his hand. "Why do you call me *Cara*?"

Ares sighs, leaning back on his hands. I watch the lines of his torso as he does. He looks up at the ceiling, unaware I'm ogling him. "Did you know my mother was Italian?" He departs the information so conversationally. I shake my head no, even though he must know this information is new to me, but I'm afraid to interrupt him. "Until her marking manifested, she lived in Italy."

"My fathers were both from America, so it was decided she would come here. She never really got over leaving her family. We usually manifest around sixteen, she was a young girl all alone except for her pair, living in a big city." Ares turns to face me, his lips tipped up at the corners crinkling his eyes. "She would like you."

Before I have a chance to say anything he continues. "She said having me made her miss home even more, we grew up speaking both languages." Dropping back on the bed, his eyes still on me he adds, "Sometimes I slip up, and in Italian *Cara* is a term of endearment."

"Where is she now?" I lie back on the bed, turning so I'm facing him with my head supported by my hand.

"She and my fathers travel quite a bit. I suppose we will see them for Christmas if not sooner." Reaching over he places some loose hair behind my ear, tracing his fingers over my neck when he pulls away.

Clearing my throat, I sit up. This is exactly what I was talking about. I've

witnessed small touches between them, it's completely normal for them, the same way they share food. I, on the other hand, take it to mean more. I want it to mean more.

Ares places his hands behind his head and stares up at the ceiling. "Now, tell me what's bothering you."

How am I'm going to tell him and what can I say that won't make me sound like the hoochy Dante already thinks I am? Maybe he'll be able to help me understand what I'm going through, maybe this is just part of being in an Infinity and I'm misunderstanding my emotions and attraction to them. My breathing is a little rough, like I've been running around the room instead of only lying next to him.

"Laura?" Ares's voice is soft, he's not demanding an answer, but he's willing to listen.

"I've been feeling... strange." I stumble over the words.

Ares adopts the same position I was in, on his side facing me with his head propped in his hand. "Strange how?"

Shrugging, I can't meet his eyes. "Different, like I'm feeling drawn to you guys." I feel the heat of Ares's palm as he slides it over my back and shoulders.

"And that bothers you?"

Another shrug. "Shouldn't it? There are four of you."

Ares sits up, repositioning so our hips and thighs are touching. I swallow, he probably doesn't even realize he's doing it. "I think you'll get more used to it, it feels completely natural to me. But I've known this was coming, or hoped it was for years. It might take you a little time to adjust to us."

"What if I don't? What if I always feel like this?" I can't chance looking at him, he's so close, and I still remember the way his lips felt on mine.

"Why don't you tell me exactly what you're feeling—are we smothering you, do you need more time alone?" His words are slow, like he's trying to decide what and how to ask.

This is so fucking awkward. Pulling my feet up off the floor, I wrap my arms around my knees and rock forward and back a few times. "Well, I'm not used to all the casual touching." I peek at him, wondering what he's thinking.

Ares's brow furrows, he removes his hand from my back, placing it in his lap. "I'll talk to the others, but you might have to remind us." He eyes are facing forward and his tone is a little flat.

I don't like how what I just said resulted in him pulling away from me. Reaching over I start to put my hand on his leg, but think better, and place it over his forearm. His eyes jerk to mine. "I don't think you understand." I beg him with my eyes to see what I'm feeling. "I don't know how to say this."

Ares turns his body so he's angled toward me, his hand finds its way to the back of my neck. Searching his eyes, I open my mouth to tell him how his simple touches affect me, how I never want him to stop, but a knock on the door, followed by someone trying to turn the knob, makes the words on my lips turn to dust.

Ares makes a growling noise from the back of his throat. "I'll kill them," he mutters. He storms over to the door, shouting, "What?" before jerking it open. A soft gasp of surprise has me frozen on the bed. Dante promised me she wouldn't come here.

Searching the empty room, I finally find the only place I'll be able to hide. I slink to the floor and crawl to the other side of the bed, flattening myself to the carpet. My heart is beating fast, my breaths coming out in a pant. Now I can only pray that Ares keeps her out of the room. A hot shot of anger filters through my blood just thinking of her in this room. But I'm the one who shouldn't be here. I'm feeling the emotions she's entitled to.

"Sorry, I thought you were one of the guys. Did you need something?" Ares's voice is tight, will she know he's hiding something?

A soft tinkling laugh fills the room. "With that reception I'm glad I wasn't, are you already tired of being home?" Her words soften at the end, like she's truly concerned he might be.

"No, no, nothing like that. I just have a lot on my mind." Ares's words ring true.

"Do you want to talk about it? I may not have been born into your world, but I've been with you for years, I understand all the pressure you put on yourself." I want so badly to peek over the bed to see them. Is she touching him?

"Thank you for the offer, but I think I need a little more time with this on my own. Good night Mia." The door clicks closed seconds after his words are uttered. Silence fills the space. If I didn't hear his dismissal of her myself, I would think I was alone in the room it's so quiet.

"Laura?" Ares's voice is urgent, the one word somehow more animated than anything he had said to her.

I poke my head up from floor. Ares freezes when his eyes land on me.

“What the hell are you doing?” he accuses, rushing over.

Flipping over on my butt, I scoot until my back hits the wall as he quickly approaches me. Ares’s posture stiffens before he resumes walking much slower. “I hid. I don’t think she saw me. I didn’t see her.” My words are rushed. My head tells me I should be feeling guilty, I’m alone in his room with him, but the rest of me is angry that she even knocked on his door, daring to interrupt us.

Ares extends his hand down to me; his brows raised in challenge when I don’t immediately reach for him. Huffing, I let him pull me up from the floor. “I didn’t expect you to hide Laura,” he says it like he’s talking to a child.

“Well how am I supposed to know? Dante just told her he was taking me home.” My voice rises in agitation. Pulling my hand from his, I brush my shirt down. Ares doesn’t step back after releasing me. My hands go to my hips and I glare up at him, mad at him for all the wrong reasons. “Dante told me she wouldn’t be back here tonight, why was she snooping around?”

Ares crosses his arms over his chest, the left side of his lips tip up in a smug grin. “She was checking on me, I’m obviously in a delicate state.”

An unladylike snort erupts from me. “Delicate my rump.” Ares angles his head around, making it look like he’s checking out my butt. “Why was she really here, I know it’s not because she knows about me being in your Infinity. Dante, Milo, and Ollie made it pretty clear tonight I’m nothing but an obligation.”

Ares drops his arms to his sides. “You’re not an obligation Laura.”

“Yeah, and you guys hiding me like some dirty secret is super telling about where I stand with all of you.” I can’t keep the bite from my words.

“Do you think we want to hide you?” Ares snaps back at me.

“Obviously, you do.” Throwing my hands in the air, I turn my back to him. I don’t want to look at him right now. “I’m used to being ignored, that I can handle. But I can’t deal with this up and down crap. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

I feel the heat of Ares’s hands land on my shoulders. “You belong with us.” His words are edged with conviction, but there’s still so much doubt. I have to make him understand that the connection I’m feeling is more than just a familial bond. Even now I want to lean back into him.

“It’s not the same for me.” I lower my head but don’t step away from him.

“What’s not the same?” He presses closer, the heat of him drawing me in.

“You guys, you’re like a family. I’ve heard you call them your bothers. I don’t feel that way, like you’re my brothers.”

Ares uses his hands on my shoulders to spin me around to face him. “What do you feel?” His voice is pitched low, there’s an urgency behind his words as his eyes search my face.

“It feels like more, like I want more from you, but not just you.” I drop my eyes, ready for him to push me away.

Ares’s fingers graze up my neck and he applies pressure under my chin, encouraging me to look back up at him. I let him direct me but close my eyes.

“Laura,” he whispers, his lips almost on mine. Why is he doing this, I just told him how I feel. Ares’s ghosts his lips over my cheek, stopping when his mouth is at my ear. “I never want you to feel like my sister.” His words are spoken with a soft growl as his arms wrap around my back. “When I kissed you earlier, do you remember *me* kissing you?” I nod, my throat dry. “I couldn’t help myself.”

“You feel the pull too?”

“It’s not just a pull, it’s so much more than that. It’s like finding a part you didn’t know was missing. Every second I’m with you, this is where I want you.” He tightens his embrace, dragging me closer.

“But you said this was bad, that the others would be mad.” I have a second of warning before he lifts me, bringing me up so we’re eye level.

“I might have said something like that, but I didn’t mean it the way you’re taking it. We agreed not to push you too far too fast.”

I push Ares’s shoulders so he’ll let me go. I need a little space, this is all so much to take in. “So, what are you saying, that this part is normal? The way I feel about you, about them? Because it doesn’t feel normal to me. I mean, I barely know you guys, but I feel like I do.”

Ares runs a hand through the front of his hair “Yes, this is what I was trying to talk to you about last night. When I said the Infinity was together, this is what I meant.”

I feel the color drain from my face, having a crush on a couple guys is one thing, but the reality of having a real relationship with all of them is so beyond what I can comprehend, that I can’t even pretend to grasp how it would work.

“Laura, this is why we didn’t tell you.” Ares walks over to the bed and sits on the end, his hands in his lap, the picture of patience.

I, on the other hand, begin to pace from wall to wall, thank goodness his

room is so empty. I'd probably be going crazy right now if I had to sit still. "Wait... you're saying that... all of us. That all of you will be..." I can't look at him, I can't even say the words out loud. Ares doesn't fill in the blanks like I'd hoped he would. He's waiting for me to spell it out. Finally, I settle on a word that doesn't seem so intimidating, one that doesn't mean forever, like they've been saying from the beginning. "My... boyfriends?" Even that comes out as a stutter.

When Ares doesn't respond I look over at him. He meets my eyes, but the slight tilt of his head and the arch of his brow challenges me. I go rigid; I need some time to wrap my head around everything this implies.

He closes his eyes on a slow blink. "Yes, something like that." I know that's not really what he wanted to say, that he's giving me time.

I nod and resume pacing. Thoughts of all four of them fill my head, how could it be possible? Milo doesn't even particularly like me. But that doesn't really seem true either, because at the beginning he was almost kinda flirty with me, not as overt as Ollie, but still. And in the car, I swear he was going to kiss me, so could he be upset at me for another reason? His words last night about Ollie hanging on me take on new meaning. I'd assumed that even though they didn't really admit to being together, that they had more going on between them than friendship. Could I have been wrong, was he jealous of Ollie?

That thought spins my mind in another direction. If they have to share me, will I have to share them? Thoughts of Mia coming to Ares's room earlier enter my mind. I turn to glare at him, not ready to voice how I feel about any of them with someone else.

There's a quick rapping on the door before it opens, revealing Dante and Milo, with Ollie trailing behind them. Dante's brows pinch together. "What did you do now?" he says accusingly to his brother after getting one look at me.

Ares stands, meeting his Dante as he enters the room. "Looks like she wants to clobber me, huh?" He gives an elegant shrug of his shoulders before wrapping his arm over Milo and Ollie's necks. They're all standing across from me in a unified front. My brain short circuits— how can what Ares said be true? I fidget, was he just having a go with me? I feel a sharp pang of sadness at the thought, no matter how abnormal this is, there's some part of me that likes the idea of us all being together.

"So, what gives Laura, what did Ares do?" Ollie questions, while looking

between the two of us.

My cheeks heat, but I can't even mutter the words. If he is making fun of me I really will clobber him, and if he wasn't...?

"She knows," Ares states, like he's informing them about the weather, his tone level and even.

"Knows what?" Milo asks.

"*Knows, knows,*" Ares confirms.

Dante bites his lip. "You mean you told her about... us, about a real Infinity?" My heart rate speeds up with his words, could Ares have been telling the truth? My mind thinks back to the conversation last night, the way Ares kept saying we would all be together, and how they've admitted our Infinity is different than all the others.

"It's true?" I whisper.

Ollie looks over at Ares. "Is that way she was mad?" He sounds reluctant, like he doesn't want to know the answer.

Ares tilts his head. "Something definitely got her all fired up, but you'll have to ask her what it is."

I blanch again, I can't answer that question. Not yet. "I'm just surprised is all," I deflect, hoping it's enough of the truth to appease them.

TWENTY TWO

Ollie breaks away from the others, coming to stand before me. “Does it freak you out?” He winces, waiting for my response. I reach my out hand to touch his forearm, not liking how unsure he looks.

“I don’t know what to think, I don’t understand how it would even be possible.”

He covers my hand with his own, holding me to him. “It’s what we’ve always known. I have two dads, Ares and Dante have two dads, Milo is one of the only sons who has three.”

“Oh my god.” I look over at Ares. “You did tell me you had two dads. I just didn’t... I mean it didn’t even register what you meant.” I pull my hand back from Ollie and cover my eyes—is this really even happening?

“Yes.” Dante answers the question I hadn’t realized I’d spoken out loud.

“But... you’re okay with that, sharing? I don’t think I can do that.” My words come out soft.

Milo shuffles his feet and pushes his long sleeves up his arms to the elbows. “You don’t like us like that?”

“It’s not about me liking you, it’s about me liking you too much. I mean, how would it even work, we make schedules for dates?” Because dating is about as far as my mind can take this idea right now.

Ollie shrugs. “Maybe, if we need to.”

“What if I’m out with you and we run into Ares and Mia? I couldn’t, I mean, I won’t do that.” I shake my head emphatically, angry at just the thought.

A dark chuckle resonates through the room and I glare over at Ares with my eyes narrowed. I really do want to smack him. “Oh *Cara*,” there’s a

gleam in his eyes that hollows out my stomach, “that would never happen.”

Crossing my arms over my chest and cocking my hip out I ask, “How are you so sure?” I mentally added *Loverboy* at the end.

“I have to say I like the reaction.” Darkness invades Ares’s eyes as he peers at me. A look of hunger on his face. What, he likes that I’m mad? I’m so confused I drop my arms, looking around between them. Milo is rubbing the back of his neck, neither Dante or Ollie will meet my eyes.

“Ares you’re not helping.” Dante sounds fluster as he approaches. “That isn’t going to be a problem Laura.” I stare up into his face, wondering what else they aren’t telling me.

I let the questions and worries fade into the background. I’m not sure I could handle knowing anymore right now anyhow.

Dante turns to look over his shoulder at his brother. “Why don’t we go watch a movie or something?” The change of topic is jarring, but not unwelcome. Getting my mind off everything that’s going on sounds way too good to pass up.

“Mia.” Milo’s one word reminder is enough to cause Dante to wince.

“We can all camp out in here.” Dante turns to examine the room and it’s like it’s the first time he notices the lack of anything but a bed. “You don’t have a TV?”

“I come in here to relax, or sleep. I don’t need a television for either of those things,” Ares drawls.

“I’ll grab my laptop, and a few things from my room,” Dante offers then slaps Ollie on his back. “Come help.” It’s not really a question. Ollie follows, leaving me alone with Milo and Ares. I cross and uncross my arms, not sure how I should act now.

Ares doesn’t suffer the same uncertainty. He saunters over and invades my space. “Why don’t you get comfortable?” His words are an invitation I don’t want to deny. I would love to curl up in his bed and just forget for a few hours.

“Can you show me where the nearest bathroom is?” I ask.

Taking my hand, Ares guides me over to the wall opposite the bed. He pushes in at a seam and the entire wall moves inward, revealing a large bathroom done up in mostly greys. There’s a glass wall dividing the shower stall from the rest of the room. I can see three black showerheads running down the wall, with a few semi-circle shelves built into the corner, holding bottles and a bar of soap. Next to the shower are free standing shelves, which

hold several white towels. On the left there is a single sink with a mirror above and black cabinets below.

Ares takes minimalism to the extreme. So, this is where he came from. The floor of the shower is still wet, as well as the glass wall. So, this is where he came from when I thought I was alone in his room earlier. I wouldn't have even known this existed had he not showed me. Looking back the door is open into the room, so I can see space on either side. There's no handle so I'm assuming it would open in both directions.

"I need my bag." My voice sounds hollow in the space. The ceiling is high, as high as the ceiling in the bedroom.

Milo walks forward with my ratty overstuffed bag, holding the strap in his hand. Just as I open my mouth to tell him to hold the bag itself, the jerry-rigged strap snaps again. I scramble to pick it up.

"Sorry," Milo winces, bending to nab it from the floor just as I am. "I'll get you a new one, this one looks pretty beat anyway."

I gather the bag to my chest. "It's fine I've fixed it before."

Ares ignores us, instead passing me to head to the sink. He opens a drawer and pulls out a gray and white toothbrush still in the packaging. What is it with him and all the dark colors? "You can use this until we get you a new one." He brings out a tube of toothpaste to set next to it.

"Ollie gave me a new toothbrush yesterday, it's upstairs in the yellow room—well the bathroom."

Milo disappears around the wall to wait in the bedroom.

"That one can stay up there, this one is for here." He doesn't give me a chance to argue, just brushes past me on his exit. "Take your time, use anything you'd like." Milo disappears around the wall.

"The shower?" I'd really like to wash my hair.

Ares turns to face me. "Of course."

"Could you show me? I've never used one like that." I wave my hand out behind me. Feeling stupid that I have to ask.

Ares dips his head as he walks over to the glass wall. His bare feet stop just outside the stall. "This is for the overhead." He leans over, tapping on a lever. "Hot is to the left. This will turn on the wall heads." He points to a button. "These can change the type of spray, but we'll play with those later. If you turn the water off, all of the heads will shut off, so don't worry about hitting the button again."

I commit the simple instructions to memory, I probably could have

figured that out on my own, but I was afraid I'd mess something up. Scanning the shelves, I see two bottles of shampoo, but no conditioner. My hair is already a tangled mess, I could really use some. "Ares." I catch his attention as he turns.

"Yes." He keeps his back to me but stops mid-stride.

"Do you have any conditioner? I hate to ask. It's just... I didn't have any yesterday either. And..."

Spinning to face me, he cuts me off saying, "Anything you need, just ask. We'll take care of anything you need."

I swallow the lump in my throat and nod.

"Milo, run up and find some conditioner, I'm sure we have some in one of the bathrooms. If not, ask Mia. She'll definitely have some."

My back goes straight "Milo, do not ask her."

Ares's eyes narrow. "Fine, if we don't have any someone needs to run to the store."

"No, they do not Milo. I'll get some tomorrow as long as I have a brush I'll be fine."

"Go look," Ares grates, never taking his eyes off me. I hear Dante's muffled voice from outside the door.

Ollie pokes his head in. "Why didn't you ask yesterday? I have some." I should have known Ollie would have conditioner, his hair is almost as long as mine. Not really but it looks a whole lot healthier.

I shrug. "You were already letting me shower here and you gave me the toothbrush. I didn't want to ask for more."

"Well you're going to have to get over that shit real quick sweetheart," Ares mutters, the term of endearment sounding more like he was chastising me instead of being kind. He stalks out of the bathroom and Ollie moves away just before getting bowled over.

His gaze follows Ares. "Geez man." Ollie shakes his head then he looks back at me. "I'll knock when he gets back. Milo just had to run over to the apartment to get it."

"Thanks Ollie." He grins at me, taking a few steps into the bathroom.

"Get out of my bathroom!" Ares booms, causing me to wince.

"Shit," Ollie curses turning to go, he watches me over his shoulder until the door closes.



FRESHLY SHOWERED WITH A THICK WHITE TOWEL WRAPPED AROUND MY HAIR, I push the door open. A hot wave of steam clouds into the room before me. All four of them are huddled close together with their heads almost touching, whispering furiously. They're so deep in debate none of them hear me exit the bathroom. I run my bare toes over the thick carpet. Should I clear my throat, say something? I can't make out what they're saying, but it seems urgent.

Reaching out I tap my fingernails on the door like I just push it open. Ares's head jerks up in my direction. His lips lift, in a fake smile. "All good?" His question throws me off, what wouldn't be good.

"Yes," I mutter hesitantly.

"Good, come sit, let's watch a movie." Dante motions me over to the far side of the bed and I poke at the towel on my head. I feel silly with all of them watching me.

I make my way over to the bed where an open laptop is sitting. I'm greeted with several chick flicks and rom-coms on the screen. Wrinkling my nose, I look up. This is the last thing I want to watch.

"Go ahead, pick whatever you want," Dante urges me. I sit down and pull the laptop over, scanning the selection for something bearable. Peeking up at them again, I notice none of them are watching me. They're all making themselves look busy by grabbing a few pillows and blankets from the end of the bed and floor.

Ares makes his way over to the bathroom, disappearing inside and leaving the door open. Searching over the titles, I find a tab at the top with romance selected. I tap the action adventure tab instead. I find a recent anti-super hero movie and click on the watch now button.

Ares returns, dropping on to the bed next to me. He scoots over enough to see my selection. A dark chuckle rumbles up his chest. "You see this yet?"

"No, but I wanted to. Have you?"

"I actually have, it's pretty good."

"We can find something else." I hit the back button, but Ares stops me, placing his hand over mine.

"No, I don't mind seeing it again. We should watch this one. Here..." Using the track pad he returns to the watch now button and hits play. "Movie's about to start," Ares announces before putting the laptop at the end of the bed and turning up the volume. He crawls back over to me. My stomach tightens—how can he make something so mundane make my head

swim? He's watching me from under his brow, eyes turning to black pools the closer he gets.

Ares hand reaches out and he pulls the damp towel from my head, tossing it to the floor. My still sodden hair tumbles down, partially covering my face. Ares's hands are gently pushing it back before I have a chance. "I brought this." He holds up a black paddle brush. That must be why he went to the bathroom.

I reach out to take it from him, but he pulls it away, holding it to his chest. My eyes go to his, questioning what he's doing. He looks over his shoulder, and is satisfied the others are still finding places to lounge. On the bed, he rests his back against the wall behind us. "Will you let me?" he whispers near my ear.

I bite my lip, no one has brushed my hair since I was a little girl. I'm worried what the others will think. I glance over at them, and Ares must understand what I'm thinking. "Stop over thinking and let me do this." He pulls his knees up spreading his legs, when he taps the inside of his thigh with the brush I swallow. He wants me to sit there. Will he even be able to brush my hair like that? He gives a sharper rap when I don't immediately jump into position. That spurs me into action. I crawl over, keeping my eyes on the floor beside the bed. I can't look at him, or the others. I don't know how do this this kind of thing. I've never had a boyfriend.

I sit with my back to him and my legs folded in front of me. I'm not touching any part of him, but I can feel his heat and him all around me.

The first scene of the movie begins with a man in a red and black suit singing an old rap song. Ares closes his legs a bit and pushes me forward with a palm on my shoulder. I feel the first touch of the brush at the ends of my hair. Slowly, he works his way through all the tangles, holding handfuls at a time so it doesn't pull from my scalp. I want to look at him, how does he know how to do this so well?

Instead I focus on the screen, Ollie has slapped my leg a few times laughing along with the others at the movie. I'm watching it, but to be honest, my eyes are falling shut more and more as Ares works his way up to my scalp. My muscles are relaxed, so when he urges me to lie back against him I do, easily. Holding up my neck gets hard within minutes. Abandoning the brush altogether, Ares begins massaging my head. If I'm not careful I'll be drooling any second.

Tightening his legs around me I feel his heat invade. I stretch out my legs,

making sure I don't kick any of the others. I know I'm going to fall asleep and I don't even try to stop it.



COMING AWAKE SLOWLY I BURROW DEEPER INTO THE WARMTH COCOONING ME. My head lifts when someone takes a deep breath. I freeze, my hands curled under me. I'm lying on someone, it has to be Ares. I can smell his musky scent, all woody with a bit of burning fire. Assessing the rest of me I realize his arms are wrapped around my back and my legs are still trapped inside his. I couldn't get away if I tried.

Squinting my eyelids, I can't make out much because his room is like a tomb when the lights are off, but I know the others are still here with us. It must still be early, or possibly late. No one else is awake. I nuzzle into Ares's chest a few times before settling in, my eyes already drifting closed.

His arms tightening on my back is the only warning I get before he rolls to his side keeping me locked against him. My hip hits the mattress as my legs land on the bed and his leg immediately hooks over my thigh, holding me in place. Ares drops his face, so his forehead is just under my jawline. I feel his every breath as it heats over my chest.

Uncurling my hand from between us, I reach under his arm and wrap my mine over his side. He sighs, I swear I feel the slight pressure of his lips at the base of my throat, but then he's breathing deeply again.

I shiver once, without the heat of his body I begin to get cold. The same stupid air vent from the last time I slept here blowing frigid air over me. A body closes in from the other side, trapping me between them. My breathing picks up, I'm not uncomfortable, it's actually the opposite. My muscles go rigid as my heart gallops in my chest. The weight of a hand on my hip has me holding my breath. I don't even know which one of them it is. After a few long seconds I exhale, trying to steady my breathing.

I don't know how much time passes, but I feel like I drift in and out of sleep for hours before an alarm on someone's phone blares, jolting me awake. I try to sit up, only to be stopped by a weight against me. Ares shifts, arching his back and his lower body rocks against me before he pulls his hips away. His arms go over his head as he rolls onto his back, or rather tries to. Cursing he growls, "Why the fuck are you spooning me?"

“Because you were trying to shove me out of bed with your ass.” Ollie’s voice is muffled.

“If you poke me with your dick, I’ll give you nightmares for a month,” Ares threatens and wraps himself back around me. I hear a huff and feel the bed shift. I’m assuming Ollie has turned on his other side.

“Is it time to get up?” My voice is rough with sleep. I place my hand over my mouth, hoping it will keep my morning breath from rolling over them.

“Shh, not yet.” It’s Dante’s voice coming from behind me. I lift my head, curious where Milo is. I find him curled up at the end of the bed, his arms tucked into his sides and his chin buried in his chest. He looks like he’s freezing. Knowing exactly how he feels, I wiggle myself out from under Ares, and away from Dante. Still half asleep I walk to him on my knees and wrap myself over his back, making him the little spoon, much like Ollie did to Ares.

Milo uncoils a bit, his body loosening as he accepts my embrace. The cool air actually feels good after being squished between the others all night. Dante kicks his legs out, and Ares rolls away from Ollie, each of them taking up the space I was filling.

It feels like minutes later when the same blaring alarm goes off again. This time it’s accompanied by groans and demands to, “Turn it off.” Ares pulls the pillow right from under his brother’s head and uses it to cover his own.

“Get out and let me sleep, I haven’t sleep this good in years. Go, and take your fucking alarm with you.” His head pops up. “Laura?” When he sees me behind Milo he grins, letting his eyes fall closed. “You stay, come back up here and keep me warm.” Ares’s words are an invitation, but I think he means more than just laying down next to him.

“Oh, she can stay?” Dante sounds grumpy. “Selfish prick,” he adds without any real heat.

Too awake to fall back asleep, I roll off the end of the bed, landing on my hands and knees. I probably could stay in that pile all day long, but my bladder is demanding attention and I can’t miss another day of school.

I find the bathroom door easily now that I know where to look and push it open. When it closes I feel the tug of a heavy magnet holding it in place. It’s pretty ingenious really, the only problem I see is there isn’t any lock.

Washing my hands, I peer into the mirror, my hair is a little tousled from falling asleep with it still damp, but there’s not a halo of frizz like I was

expecting. The miracle of nice shampoo and conditioner I guess. Or maybe my hair just doesn't want to disappoint Ares. Having him brush my hair last night was the single most relaxing thing I've ever experienced. I can only hope he'll do it again some time.

Using my second new toothbrush, I scrub my teeth and splash some water on my face. My bag is still on the floor in the corner, so I strip off my t-shirt and leggings. Digging through the bag I find my last clean pair of underwear and pull out an older pair of jeans I haven't worn in a while. They're tighter than I'm used to but not too bad. My problem is the length, I'll have to cuff the bottoms to make them into capris or I'll be wearing floods. I top it off with a faded green t-shirt that's a little slouchy and call it a day.

Everyone's still asleep when I come out. I'm not surprised to find Ollie half hanging off the bed, his arm touching the floor, and Ares spread out on his back. Dante faired a little better since he's still on the bed, but not by much. Milo's face is inches away from Ares feet, but he's completely out. I wish I had a camera. Of all the times I've seen kids with phones, playing games and taking pictures, this is the first time I'm actually really jealous.

A light from the floor flashes, and the alarm starts again. Rushing over I grab it just as Ollie reaches out to nab it. His hand smacks down on mine, causing me to jump back from the shock. His head snaps up at the loud crack. Eyes half open, his mouth works like a fish. "Oh man, I'm so sorry. Did I get you?" All traces of sleep are erased from his face and his voice is urgent.

Rubbing my forearm, I shake my head, "No, it's okay. I was just going to shut it off. I should have left it alone."

Ares leans his head over Ollie's shoulder. "What'd you do?"

Dante pops up next, followed by Milo. Wincing, I stand up from my crouched position. I don't need to be the center of attention right now. He was just reaching for his phone, clearly, he didn't expect me to be in the way.

"I clipped her when I was getting my phone," Ollie answers when I don't.

"I'm fine, just startled that's all," I say dropping my arms to my side.

"Then why do you have a big red welt on your arm?" Ares points out, not helping at all. I cover the spot, knowing immediately what he's referring to.

"Shit, I'm sorry Laura." Ollie hops out of the bed and reaches for me. He wraps me in a hug, my arms trapped between us. Awkwardly, I pull free and pat his back.

"Really it's okay. I'm not that fragile," I grumble the words over his chest. He releases me, but keeps his hands on my shoulders looking down at

me.

“You’re dressed.” Sounding slightly shocked he glances over his shoulder repeating, “She’s dressed.”

“You guys have snoozed like three or four times.” I brush little hairs and lint from the front of my shirt. My feet are still bare, so I curl my toes in the thick carpet; I’m going to need to ask if I can borrow a pair of socks. At least I won’t need a whole outfit today, but I’m completely out of socks.

Surprising me Milo asks, “Do we really need to go to school today?”

“I do. I can’t have the school looking for my mom.”

Dante sighs, but sits up, his back to me as he spreads his arms wide. “That’s something else we need to talk about.” He groans through the stretch.

Looking down at the floor I bite my lip. “Later?” I can’t keep the hopeful tone from my voice. My mom’s disappearance isn’t something I want to talk about this early in the morning, or at all really. But I understand I need to tell them, I need to figure out what happened to her, and Ares promised to help.

“Yes later,” Ares confirms, “but I’d like that picture if you have it so I can do a little research.”

“What are you looking for? What good is her picture?” I ask, already on my way over to my bag just outside the bathroom door.

“Right now, I just want to see if anyone I know recognizes her. There has to be a reason she kept everything from you. I need to know what that is.” Ares takes the picture from my hand, not looking at it he leans down and places his lips at my temple. “Good morning *Cara*,” he whispers just for me to here.

A shiver skates its way down my spine, curling my toes. “Morning Ares.” He grunts but moves away.

“We need new sleeping arrangements. My legs are cramped from keeping them tucked up all night, so I wouldn’t kick Milo.”

“Yeah, well if you would have let us move Laura after she fell asleep, we could have all been more comfortable,” Milo fires back, stretching his neck back and forth.

“I like where she was just fine.” Ares walks into the bathroom, closing the door before anyone else can reply.

“Sorry.” I feel the need to apologize even though I was sleeping. Not to mention I was pretty damn comfortable.

“We just need a bigger bed,” Milo offers with a slight grin, he shrugs when my cheeks go red.

TWENTY THREE

I'd emptied my bag, leaving only the things I would need for school, so it wasn't very heavy as I made my way over to Dante's car trailing behind Milo, who was drinking a green smoothie he'd whipped up in no time. He had offered me one, but after watching him stuff a handful of spinach in the blender I had to decline. Ollie, on the other hand, had a blueberry muffin topped with thick white icing and big crystals of sugar, which I was more than happy to share.

Ares and Dante had disappeared together not long after Ares came out of the bathroom. I hadn't seen either of them since, but Milo said he would be coming any minute, so we headed to the car to wait.

It wasn't lost on me that I hadn't seen Mia either. I'd been looking over my shoulder every few seconds expecting her to walk into the kitchen at any moment and then we would have to explain why I was here.

Settling into the backseat, I drop my bag at my feet. Milo ducks into the seat beside me, his large duffle bag already stowed in the truck. "I'll get you a new bag today," he announces while toeing my ragged book bag.

"It's not a big deal, it'll hold up a little longer." I don't want to spend any extra money right now. I'll need to start a new emergency fund.

"Laura, that bag is falling apart. How long have you had it? Five years?" He laughs like he's made a joke, but he's probably pretty close to the truth.

"Maybe, like I said it'll last a little longer."

Milo looks over at me, all the laughter gone. "Are you being serious?"

"Why would you think I was joking?" I feel the frown on my lips.

"Why wouldn't you be? You seriously need a new bag... and some new clothes, and shoes," he adds, crossing his arms over his chest. The to-go cup

his drink was in is abandoned on the seat between us.

“No, those aren’t things I need, they may be things I could use, but I don’t *need* them. I *need* to pay my lot rent. I *need* to buy some food.”

The driver’s door opens while Milo and I are locked in a stare down. “Shit, I didn’t think I was ever going to get out of there.” Dante slides the keys into the ignition, waiting several seconds before turning over the car.

“I didn’t say you shouldn’t do those things, I’m just saying that you *need* the other things too. We’ll go pick up some stuff today,” Milo continues, not willing to drop the subject.

I’m already shaking my head before Milo finishes. “I have to work today, and I don’t have that kind of extra money right now. It’ll wait. If you don’t want to be seen with me and my bummy clothes and dirty sneakers, then too damn bad.” My arms are crossed over my chest mimicking his pose.

Dante shifts to look at us in the backseat. “Don’t get involved bro,” Ollie mock whispers from the side of his mouth.

“I didn’t say a damn word about you paying for any of it.” Milo leans in closer to me, his teeth slightly bared. “I don’t give a fuck if your shoes are dirty, or what your clothes look like, but you need them right? That piddling pile you left on the floor in Ares’s room is just about everything you own. Unless you’re going to start walking around naked, or in our clothes, you need more.”

Narrowing my eyes at him I fire back, “I’ve made do with that measly pile for years before you all showed up. I just need to do some fucking laundry.”

“God help me,” Milo looks up at the ceiling and then back at me. “Laura...” He looks down at my rolled up too tight jeans. If I had a pair of sandals instead of my faded gray socks, which are gaping at my ankles, and worn sneakers, I could probably pull off the look. But I know how I look. His eyes land on my battered backpack and he lunges forward, snatching it off the floorboard. Hastily Milo unzips the top, grabbing the contents from inside. I reach over to take it back, but he turns his back to me, keeping my stuff on his lap. I’m not going to fight him for it, I’d never win. Once it’s empty he grabs his own bag and dumps it out on the seat. Pens and pencils roll onto the floor and loose sheets of paper flutter out, landing in a messy heap.

“Milo,” I warn, finally understanding what he’s doing. He’s tosses his bag, now filled with my stuff, back on the floorboard at my feet. He’s

breathing a little heavily and he just leaves his stuff where it landed, not bothering with it.

“Well okay.” Ollie stretches out the words, tuning back to the front. I kick the black canvas bag at my feet, silently fuming at Milo. I’m not even sure why I’m mad, I should just accept what he’s offering and move on. But it grates on something inside me. I want to feel like their equal. Let’s face it I’m not, well not yet anyway.

The rest of the short ride to school is quiet. When Dante parks in the student lot, I have a second where I contemplate throwing a tantrum, dumping all my stuff out of the bag and then just carrying in my books and notebooks. Thankfully good sense and practicality win over my childish temptation.

Dropping my head, I shuffle ahead of them by a few steps. I’m not sure who saw me getting out of Dante’s car, but I really don’t need Delaney on my back today. “I’ll see you in third hour,” Ollie calls from behind me. I give him a half-hearted wave over my shoulder. Not bothering telling Milo or Dante goodbye.

Feeling the weight of my backpack shift, sliding a little off my shoulder, I look behind me. Milo is there and he’s lifting the strap I don’t have slung on my shoulder. I feed my arm through the loop he’s holding out, not even realizing I had only been using one, like I had to with my bag. Once it’s secured he steps back away from me, letting me continue to the entrance doors.

Guilt at my behavior stabs at my chest. I open my mouth to apologize, but I catch sight of all the curious faces around us, so I snap my lips together and nod instead. I’ll tell him later.

Near the end of second hour the girl next to me in the aisle leans over and whispers, “So, you know Milo, huh?” I glance at her, wondering where this is going. Am I going to have another Delany on my hands?

“A little I guess.” I keep my voice quiet because I don’t want to draw any more attention.

“He’s going to take us to state.” Her words are spoken kinda dreamy, like she’s already fantasizing about the prospect.

“Oh, you mean football?” I’m sure she can tell I’m a little shocked from my question.

Rolling her eyes, she replies, “Yes, I mean football. I’ve been cheering at this shitty school since I was a freshman. It’s about damn time, if we had a

few more decent players we would have been there the last two years. *But one player does not make the team.*" She emphasizes the last part like she's repeating something she was told.

"I'm Lisa by the way. Laura, right?" I nod, wondering why she's introducing herself to me now. "Ugh, I hate Mrs. Vergiels, she's the worst with all her droning. I mean, does she always have to harp on the reading? I hate reading." Lisa drops her head to the desk. I look up at the teacher in question. Lisa wasn't even particularly quiet. Isn't she afraid she'll be overheard?

"I actually like reading," I offer with a small wince. I sound like a total teacher's pet.

"I'm more of an 'I'll watch the movie' kind of girl," she remarks, looking up from her desk. I grin thinking her drama, though a little over the top, is kinda funny. "Thank God," Lisa groans, jumping out of her seat the moment the bell rings. "See ya later," she adds before rushing to the door.

Ollie is already in his seat behind me when I make it to third hour. His face goes from a leery wince to a wide-toothed grin when I walk in. Wrapping my backpack straps over the back of my seat, I turn and face him while sitting down. "Happy to see me?" I joke.

"Sooo, happy. How's your day going?" Ollie reaches forward and runs the tips of his fingers over my inner arm. I swear I feel a lick of heat accompanying his touch.

"Okay I guess," I answer reflexively, preoccupied with watching his fingertips ghost over my arm, and the definite warmth it's causing.

"Are you still mad at Milo?" His words are whispered. I bite my lip but shake my head in denial. "That's good, he's been being kind of dickish, but it's not really his fault. I mean it kind of is, but it's not like he means it." My eyes start to slide closed, the heat of his touch is pooling in more places than just my arm. I register his words, but they don't seem very important right now, what seems important is the way I want to pull that warmth deeper into me.

"Laura!" My eyes jerk open when Ollie shouts my name frantically. I jerk back and look around. Class hasn't started yet but there are plenty of other people in the room. Why did he yell at me? Ollie's eyes are glassy with panic when I meet them. "Did it work? Are your hiccups gone?" His eyes bulge as he stares at me.

"Ah yes, that did it, thank you."

Ollie smiles, but it's forced. His hands are under the desk. "Yeah a good scare will make them disappear." A few heads turn away from us, returning to their phones or conversation. Ollie leans forward, the fake smile still on his lips as he says, "I'm sorry, we can talk about it later." His mouth barely moves. I swallow and face the front of the room, there was definitely something going, but it's obviously something we can't talk about here.

When class lets out Ollie walks me to the door but keeps a few feet of distance between us. Frowning, I wave as he moves through the crowded halls calling out a distracted, "Bye."



SITTING IN THE STAIRWELL, MY USUAL LUNCH SPOT, I EXPECT ONE OR ALL OF them will show up at some point, but I find myself slightly disappointed when they never do. Milo helped me pack my lunch this morning, and by helped, I mean tried to give me three times what I could eat. I still have an apple and carrot sticks I didn't get to that he refused to let me take out. I do have to say though, the fresh turkey with lettuce and pickles was so much better than my usual peanut butter sandwich.

I don't share anymore classes with them until art with Dante last hour, so I guess my questions about what happened with Ollie will have to wait a few more hours.



TODAY IS THE LAST DAY TO WORK ON OUR PORTRAITS AND AT THE END OF THE hour Mr. Adams will collect them so they can be judged. I'm under no illusion that mine stands a chance, but I am proud of what I was able to accomplish. I stare at the project I've been working on over the last several weeks and analyze each line, finding some spots I've shaded too heavily, and some with proportion problems. But the overall piece isn't bad for someone who had no clue what they were doing to begin with. Mr. Adams deserves all the credit. If it wasn't for him, I would have handed in a stick figure and rightfully earned a failing grade.

The seat beside me remains empty, even after the bell rings. Worry gnaws at my stomach. Where's Dante, what could be keeping him from class today?

I know this project was important to him. I don't know why, he clearly has enough money to go to the college of his choosing, but somehow I know this meant something special to him.

The class is louder than usual, I think everyone is excited to hand in their work or maybe just to start something new. Mr. Adams doesn't even try to quiet the room as he makes his way around to each student with last bits of advice. When it's finally my turn I can't stop myself from asking, "Will Dante be able to hand his in late?"

My art teacher tilts his head and looks at me. "Dante already handed his project in earlier today." Shrugging he adds, "He had to finish up the yearbook cover so it could be finalized. I didn't mind, he could have handed his project in last week."

My eyes go round before I look away. "Oh okay." He's with Delaney. That thought makes me forget I was just concerned about him and his portrait. It makes me want to hunt them down so I can stake claim the way she tried to. I shake the notion away. Even though I know our lives are intertwined, I still don't know everything that entails.

"Laura?" Mr. Adams calls for my attention, I don't think I was very good at hiding my disappointment. "I think you've really outdone yourself on this," he adds when I look in his direction. Biting the inside of my lip, I nod my head in agreement. Mr. Adams helps me with a few final details before moving on to the last students.

When the bell rings I leave my paper, along with everyone else's, on the teacher's desk. I don't rush from class like I usually do. Instead, I take my time I'm feeling indecisive. Should I go to the back lot to see if the guys are there, or just walk over to the diner like I would normally do? As the halls begin to clear I make the decision to go out the back way, and if they aren't there I'll head to Maggie's.

Ollie is jogging up from the lot as I open the door. He spots me and comes to my side. "I was wondering if you got lost?" he jokes, placing his arm around my neck and hauling me toward the car.

"We never talked about after school. I wasn't sure if I should just head to Maggie's. I thought you guys might have left for the day." Milo is waiting by the car, he's looking at me, but he keeps looking away when my eyes land on his. Does he think I'm still mad about this morning?

"Hi Milo," I give him a small wave, hoping it's enough for right now. I don't want to apologize standing in the parking lot.

His eyes travel over my face before he responds with a simple, “Hey, good day?”

I nod, both my thumbs hooked into the backpack straps. It feels so much more comfortable to have the weight evenly dispersed across shoulders.

Ollie releases me and gives me a slight shove on my back, pushing me to the passenger side of the car. Milo already has the door open and is climbing into the backseat. I move to follow, but he pulls the front seat into place before I can. I stop, my fingers going to my lips. Ollie is in the driver’s seat when I duck my head to ask, “Are we not waiting on Dante?”

“Nah, he has to finish up with the yearbook today. Delaney complained to Mr. Schroder that he wasn’t here most of the week.”

“Who’s Mr. Schroder?” Placing my bag on the bench, I slide into the passenger seat. “Milo, I don’t mind the back, do you want to switch?”

“I have an idea,” Ollie answers, grabbing the bag and tossing into the back.

“Hey,” I admonish but he ignores me.

“Scoot over here,” Ollie pulls my arm, tugging me to the middle of the bench seat. “Milo, jump out for a minute.” I end up leaning over on Ollie’s side as Milo pushes the seat forward to get out of the back. Thinking he wants me to climb over the seat, I inch over back to the other side and turn. “Good, now hop in.” Ollie adds when the seat falls back into place.

Milo doesn’t hesitate to get in the front. I’m sandwiched between them. My heart rate jumps a little. I drop my hands into my lap, feeling a little overwhelmed by their presence. Milo’s arm goes over the back of the seat, and around me. I bite the inside of my cheek when his fingers delve under my hair and reach out to land on Ollie’s shoulder. Milo’s head falls to the headrest behind him, his eyes already closed.

Now that I can examine him, I see crescents of dark circles under his eyes. He looks exhausted. Did he not sleep well last night? I feel a pang of sympathy. Tonight, I’ll make sure he has a more comfortable place to sleep.

“He’s fine,” Ollie tells me, even though I didn’t ask. I take another peek at Milo before looking out the front window. Maneuvering the car toward the exit, Ollie waits in the line to turn out.

When we reach the diner, Ollie puts the car in park and opens his door for me to climb out. Milo is passed out in the passenger seat, his lips slightly parted as he takes deep even breaths. “One of us will pick you up tonight when you get off, if we don’t make it here before then.” Ollie leans in a gives

me a quick peck on the corner of my mouth. Before I realize it's even happening, he's back in the car with a devilish grin, waving as he pulls away seconds later. I, however, stand there frozen with my fingers over the spot he just kissed.

Walking into the diner I keep my head low, I don't know if Maggie was around to see Ollie kiss me. I don't know what she'll think if she was. I know she knows about me being in their Infinity, but I'm still so unsure of what that means for all of us. Is Maggie in an Infinity? I've never seen any men here visiting her. I know she hangs out with Gus in the back if we're slow, and I always thought they might have something going on, but it's definitely not obvious.

"Hey Laura," Maggie greets me with a kind voice. I look up, so many questions on the tip of my tongue. "We'll probably be busy again, it's the last JV home game of the season."

"Let me just put my stuff in the back and I'll do a quick check of the bathrooms and make sure we're okay on silverware while I have the time." Happy for the excuse to escape her too knowing eyes I push past the swinging doors of the kitchen. Gus is standing over a deep stockpot, slowly stirring the contents. He looks up at me and gives me a grunt and wave before his attention returns to his pot.

Maggie definitely isn't wrong. We're slammed most of the night. Tables full of younger kids from school, none of them looking for trouble, but a few are loud and obnoxious. They thin when the game starts, but we still have a steady stream of people coming and going all night.

I begin to feel the effects of actual tiredness, or the effects of not being around the guys, as the evening gets closer. When I'm busy running around and my mind is too absorbed with everything I have to do, I'm okay. It's the second I have a chance to breathe when I realize just how exhausted I really am.

The door chimes again, and I turn to greet the new customer, making sure we have an open place for them. Delaney and three of her friends are looking around the small diner, like they might be searching for someone. I know it's not me because they've all passed over me like I don't even exist, which is fine by me. I get a slight thrill knowing I don't have a booth available that will seat four, so they'll have to sit up at the bar with Maggie.

Feeling the pressure of someone's hand on my shoulder I turn. "Excuse us." The father of a family passes me with his group in tow, leaving the diner.

“Damn it,” I curse under my breath. Moving over to the table they just left, I stack their dishes and glasses. I back my way through the doors to the kitchen and drop the plates next to the washer. I’ll have to come back to rinse them, I need to get the table wiped off. They had two kids, and there is salt and ketchup all over. Snagging the towel from the bleach water, I wipe down the table and pocket the three singles and change left behind in my apron.

I know Delaney is behind me before I even turn. I can hear her snooty voice and smell her floral perfume. I wrinkle my nose, she smells like an old lady. It’s probably some expensive stuff, but I think it smells like she’s been walking around a craft shop for too long.

Fake smile in place I turn and motion for the table. “All yours. I’ll give you guys a minute to look over the menu, can I get you anything to drink?”

“Oh my God, she actually does speak,” one of the girls snickers.

Sliding into the booth, Delaney peers up at me all wide-eyed and innocent looking. “Wow, who knew?” Her eyes go back to her friends, and they completely ignore my question about drinks so I don’t linger.

After checking on a few tables and refilling some drinks, I make my way back over to them, order pad and pen in hand. “You guys know what you want to order?”

“We were actually just wondering, what’s it like to clean up everyone’s leftovers? I mean, clearly it’s something you like to do, you do it here, and we all know how hard you’re trying with *several* guys at school.”

Heat rises in my face. I know what she’s implying, even if it doesn’t make sense. “Did you say you need a few more minutes? No problem.” I turn my back to them. They aren’t worth my energy. I know the truth now, Dante was never her boyfriend. She was the one trying to make it seem like he was.

“Hey,” Delaney calls before I get too far, “we can’t wait all night. We’d like to order.” Her voice is clipped. My back goes rigid, but I turn back to their table.

“Laura, when you’ve finished up over there can you help me for a minute?” Maggie calls from the bar.

“Sure thing, Maggie, I’ll be right there.” This isn’t the first time Maggie has saved me from a customer, but I’m damn grateful she has. Now I have an excuse to get away from them quickly without looking like I’m trying too hard. “What can I get you?”

“I want fries, and make sure your dirty hands don’t touch them. You didn’t even wash up after picking up money from the table.” I inwardly roll

my eyes, I just had my hands in bleach water. Delaney is just trying to get under my skin.

“And you?” I urge the others.

“I’ll have fries too, and a diet coke,” one girl fires off.

“Rootbeer float for me.”

The last girl bites her lip, her eyes volleying back and forth on the menu, and flicking to the girls surrounding her. “I’ll take a cup of chicken noodle soup and a water.” She pushes the menu away from her, toward the wall. Her face is rounder than the others but she isn’t even close to over weight. The pressure to be thin and perfect is probably paramount in their group.

“Should be up quick,” I tell them, walking over to the counter. “Thanks Maggie,” I whisper out the side of my mouth, placing the ticket on the spinner and ringing the bell to let Gus know he has an order.

“Anytime honey.” She gives me a wink.

I get busy making their drinks, Delaney didn’t order one but I’m making her a water anyway. Maggie will take care of the float when the rest of the food order is up. I place the three glasses on the table with each girl, pulling straws from my apron pocket. I don’t speak to them and they ignore me too.

I’m able to wipe down a few more tables as they empty while I’m waiting for the girls’ fries and soup to come up. Glancing up at the clock I sigh, less than an hour before I get off.

Gus rings the bell notifying me an order is up, and I finish wrapping my bundle of silverware and hop off the stool. The door jingles when I’m placing the plates on my tray. It’s empty enough that they’ll be able to find a seat without my help, so I continue what I’m doing and grab ketchup on my way to the table.

“Fries for you.” I place them in front of the other girl first. “Soup for you, and fries for you. Can I get you anything else?” Delaney’s eyes are looking past me, her mouth hanging open.

“Oh no way.” Her hushed words have me turning. I know what’s got her attention the moment I see him. Ares is standing at the counter. His back is to us and the slim fit of his trousers and shirt leave little to the imagination, showcasing the fit body underneath. I know, I’ve seen a little of that body.

Facing her again, I clear my throat. “Can I get you anything else?”

“No, no.” She waves me off, her head lowered to the table, but her eyes not leaving Ares. I hear “Dante’s brother” whispered as I walk away. Returning to the opposite end of the counter I finish rolling the forks and

knives.

I think Ares is here for me; he's probably my ride home, or rather to his house. I get a sick thrill knowing how crazy jealous it's going to make Delaney. I know it's immature, but I don't care.

Trying not to look his way, I still know the moment he's done speaking with Maggie and he's headed in my direction. My breath quickens, along with the beating of my heart. "Hello *Cara*," he purrs near my ear after placing his hand on the back of my stool.

"Hello Ares." My voice is breathy in response. His body moves in closer and I feel the fabric of his shirt brush against my arm as he does.

"Excuse me, may I have a refill?" Delaney's sweet voice coos over to me. I've heard her use that tone with Dante before.

I huff. "I'll be right there," I call back loud enough for her to hear. "Sorry, just a sec," I tell Ares as I slide out of the stool from the other side.

Delaney is holding up her glass of water, it's not even empty. "Thanks." She pushes it at me without looking in my direction. "Oh hey, you're Ares, Dante's brother." She flips her hair over her shoulder then runs her fingers over her arm. "He told me you just came home. Happy to be back?"

Ares watches me take her cup and pour it out before adding new ice and hitting the button for filtered water from the soda machine. "Yes, very," he replies finally looking over at her. His eyes narrow like he's trying to place her.

"Dante was at my house before we came here." Delaney's eyes are all doe-like as she peers up at him. I drop the water glass a little harder than intended and a tiny bit splashes over the top.

"Can I get you guys anything else? A box?" I offer for their barely eaten fries. They could have easily shared an order for how little they ate.

"No thanks," she says in dismissal and leans around me to get a better view of Ares. He's still standing a few steps away, his arms crossed over his chest.

I pull their bill from my apron and set it in the middle of the table, clearing away the empty soup cup and dish. The two packets of crackers are gone, but I don't see the wrappers. I have to force myself not to move over to block him from her sight. It's petty jealousy and I won't stoop low enough to acknowledge it. I ignore Ares as I pass him to take the dirty dishes to the kitchen, I rinse the ones I didn't have a chance to earlier and the new ones I added, placing them all in the rack to run through the machine.

When I finally come back out I'm surprised to find Ares sitting in my spot meticulously rolling napkins and silverware. I watch as he lines up the bottoms of the fork and knife and places them on the napkin. Using the first knuckle of his pointer finger to measure how far up to place them, he rolls slowly, making sure it stays completely even. He then tucks them into the tilted rectangular pan we keep them in.

"Is this your way of telling me I'm slacking?" I joke when I near Ares's shoulder. He pauses and looks up at me. His tawny eyes shining, it's not fair how handsome he is.

"Never, I guess old habits die hard. I used to work here too you know."

"Really?" I can't keep the doubt from my voice. I scan him from head to well-tailored toe.

Ares chuckles and turns toward me so his knee bumps my thigh. He wraps his hands around my waist like it's the most natural thing in the world and leans his face near mine. "Don't sound so shocked."

I tilt my head, enjoying the lightness of the banter. "I just can't picture it. How old were you?"

"Twelve," Ares answers around a grin.

"Oh, I see, did you wear a little suit, maybe even a bowtie?" His fingers tighten over my hips. Darkness bleeds from his pupils. I look around to see if anyone is watching. Delaney and her friends are the only ones paying us any attention, but their table is too far away to see his eyes. "Ares," I whisper, my lips turning down in a frown.

He stiffens. "What is it?"

"Your eyes, aren't you worried someone might see?" He closes his lids, hiding the dark pools from me. When he reopens them all the darkness has faded, leaving the burnished brown behind.

"It's not something I've even had to think about for years. I'll be more careful." His tone is flat like he's trying for indifference.

"Wait." I place my hand on his shoulder as he prepares to rise. He meets my eyes but looks away quickly. "I was just worried someone would see and know that you... that we are different," I whisper the last part close to his ear. Leaning back, I gaze at his face. "It doesn't bother me," I confess, hoping he can sense the truth in my words. "It's like I get to see into your soul, I don't want you to... I mean please don't hide that from me," I stammer over the words.

Ares drops heavily onto the stool. His arms go around me the next second

and he squeezes me to him. Lips at my temple he mutters, “Thank you.”

I pull back, confusion pouring from me. “For what?” Instead of answering me Ares places his lips on mine and gives me a sweet soft kiss then he pulls back. Some of the darkness returns to cover his irises, but most people would just assume his pupils are dilated.

I know I need to pull away, to stop staring at him or I’m going to lean forward and kiss him. But I can’t make my mouth say the words, or force my body to move away.

“Laura?” Maggie’s voice cuts through me and I spin away from Ares. “You want Gus to pack you up a box for dinner?”

“No, the guys are waiting at home for us to eat together,” Ares answers for me. He walks out from behind me and goes over to Maggie’s side of the bar. I still haven’t caught my breath.

“It won’t last.” I turn to find Delaney watching Ares, but her words are for me.

“What won’t last?”

Without looking in my direction she answers, “None of it. You’ll never be more than what you are.”

I cross my arms over my chest. Delaney’s friends are already heading to the door. I ask, “And what am I?”

Her eyes finally meet mine, there’s a bitterness there, and in that moment, I think she’s actually trying to warn me. That she’s not just being cruel, but she’s telling me what she truly believes. “Nothing. You’ll never be good enough to hold his attention, either of them. My sister warned me. She told me about the Costa’s, but I didn’t listen, couldn’t listen. Believe me, you’ll wish you had.” Delaney walks out, her back stiff and head held high as she passes Ares with a small wave. “Don’t forget to tell Dante I said hi.” That same sugary sweetness is back in her tone. I shake my head, I can’t believe that just happened.

Ares waves his hand dismissively, continuing his conversation with Maggie. I turn my attention to the booths around me, it’s almost closing time. Only a few stragglers remain. Giving out my last few checks, I grab the mop bucket from the back and roll it into the bathroom. I could use a few minutes alone anyway. I don’t want to feel bad for Delaney, but I find myself doing just that anyway.

TWENTY FOUR

Ares is the only person left in the front when I return from my closing duties. He's sitting at the counter with a tall glass of untouched soda. His eyes aren't focused on anything as he gazes toward the wall in front of him. I rub my hands together as I approach. "Ares." His head jerks in my direction, and he's already rising from the stool in one fluid movement. "Hey, I was wondering..." I rub the toe of my shoe over the tiled floor. "Could we stop by my place first? I mean if I'm still going back to yours. Or whatever, can we?" The words rush out. It feels weird to assume I'm going back to their house, like I'm inserting myself with them. But I'm pretty sure that's what's happening, but I still need to check on the RV to see if my mom comes back at any point.

Ares gives a quick nod and responds, "Of course. Do you have a bag or anything you need to grab?"

"No, I left my bag with the guys when they dropped me off." Placing his palm on the small of my back, Ares leads me over to the door. "Bye Maggie," I call over my shoulder, letting her know we're leaving. I've been kinda leery of coming into work now that I know she knows about the guys and me. I thought she might question me or treat me differently. But thankfully her demeanor hasn't changed at all.

Ares opens my door for me then jogs around to his side. He slides into the SUV, pushing the start button as I'm buckling my seatbelt. "The others are waiting for us at home. Gloria made dinner, but we wanted to wait for you to eat."

"You guys didn't have to do that," I say immediately, but I get a secret thrill knowing they waited for me.

“None of us are starving Laura, Ollie has probably been snacking all evening, but we all wanted to wait.”

I’m glad the car interior is dim so he can’t see the slight tinge of pink on my cheeks. “Well thanks, I guess.” I shrug, not in indifference, but because I don’t know what to say, or how to tell him it means something to me.

Ares looks over at me then focuses back on the road. “Let’s try to be quick tonight. I think we should probably talk about a more permanent solution regarding your camper over dinner as well.”

“But—” I start to argue.

Ares drops his hand on my knees interrupting me. “I’m just saying there are other ways of knowing if your mom comes back without us bringing you here every night.”

I drop my head, insecurity warring inside me. It doesn’t seem like a lot to ask. I mean, they didn’t even ask when they basically told me I would be staying with them. “Well if it’s too much trouble, don’t bother. I’m capable of checking by myself.” I turn my legs to the door, dislodging Ares’s hand.

He sighs. “I never said it was a problem *Cara*, I just said there are better ways of knowing when and if she comes back, safer ways.”

I lift my lip in a small sneer. “Safer for who? Why wouldn’t it be safe?”

“We haven’t really had a chance to talk about this with everything else going on, I was hoping we could talk more at dinner. But we really don’t have any information on your mom, and what happened to her. From what I’ve gathered from you, it seems like pretty strange behavior for her. So, there might be more to this than your mom just taking off.”

I’ve been thinking that all along, but I haven’t really voiced it, or had anyone to talk about it with. My stomach does a flip, it feels more real all of the sudden. “Sorry, okay.” My voice is small.

“Don’t be sorry Laura, there’s been a lot going on, I have a feeling there’s a lot more we don’t even know about yet. I just... we just want to keep you safe.” Ares turns into the drive of Turtle Creek, gravel crunching under his tires. It only takes a few moments to drive to the back of the park, my camper still stands alone among the tress and blacktop pads.

Tugging my keys from my front pocket, I hand them over to Ares before he even asks. “I only want to check. But you’re right, I don’t think she randomly decided to leave me. Not after all this time, and without telling me.”

Ares places his hand over mine, not taking the keys right away. “We’ll

figure out what happened.” I’m grateful he doesn’t make empty promises to find her, or bring her back to me. But I’m even more grateful I have someone who can help me and I’m not alone anymore.



I TOE OFF MY SNEAKERS IN THE ENTRYWAY AND I’M TOO DRAINED TO BOTHER lining them against the wall. Ares keeps his steps close to mine. He hasn’t said much since we left the RV, no one had been there in my absence. At his insistence, I took most of the rest of my stuff, which consisted of a few pieces of dirty clothing and my toiletries. He stood vigilant as I sorted through our things. He didn’t bat an eyelash when I removed the drawer next to the bed and pulled out an envelope with a few bucks inside. I’d already taken my sock money the other day and this was my new hiding spot since the one from the freezer was emptied.

With a small plastic grocery bag in hand I turn to face him. “Do you mind if I do a load of laundry or two? It’s already late but I’d like to get it started so I’ll have stuff for school tomorrow.” I know he said they’d been waiting on me to eat, but I really need to get this taken care of.

Ares looks away from me. “We already took care of that.” He urges me further into the house.

“What do you mean?” I’m walking with my hand on my back but looking over at him.

Ares ignores my question and keeps moving to the kitchen. I can already hear the sounds of the guys banter as we near. “Ares?”

“Hope you like bruschetta chicken, I took a chance since you like lasagna so much. I’m betting you’ll like it.” He tells me like I didn’t just ask him something completely unrelated to dinner. “And bread, there’s lots of garlic bread. I have to admit it’s a weakness of mine.”

“Hey, finally,” Ollie calls once we round the corner. He rushes over, stopping just shy of touching me. His mouth opens, and he looks over my shoulder at Ares who’s still behind me. Ollie snaps his mouth shut and glances back down at me. “Who’s hungry?” he asks unnecessarily loud, spinning on his heel away from me.

I narrow my eyes at Ares’s back because he’s now stepping away from me too. What is going on here? I have a feeling I’m not going to like it.

We're all sitting around a long dining table just off the kitchen. The table is already set with plates and silverware, even little goblets of water. I feel like I'm being buttered up for something, only I have no idea what.

Ares takes the seat at the head of the table with Dante to his right. Milo pulls out the seat on Ares's left for me, then sits down on my other side, while Ollie takes the spot next to Dante. I look around, the room is formal, like where you'd expect to have holiday meals and such. I felt more out of place here than I have anywhere else in the house.

Crossing my legs and placing my linen napkin on my lap, I wait for the others. Ollie lets out a muffled snort. I look over at him and watch as he uses his hand to hide the obvious smile on his lips. "I told you this wasn't a good idea." Dante rolls his eyes.

"We have a lot to discuss, I thought it would be easier here than in the kitchen," Ares adds, sounding like he's scolding young children.

"Can't we just sit on the couch like normal?" Ollie asks, a slight whine to his tone. "This room makes me feel like I'm about to get in trouble for sneaking wine."

Milo shakes his head. "Probably because every time you were in here, you did."

"Couldn't be helped. I needed to take a bit of the edge off, you know I can't stand all the stuffy bastards that would always show up."

"You were twelve," Milo adds drolly.

"Let's just eat," Ares interrupts, passing me a plate piled high with buttery garlic toast. Everyone starts filling their plates with tomato and herb topped chicken and creamy rice.

The table is quiet at first, only the clatter of dishes and cutlery to fill the silence. Ares's roll of leader is becoming more clearly defined with each passing day. He begins the conversation by saying, "Laura, what more can you tell us about your mom, about how you came to be here in Canton?" I swallow a delicious bite of chicken and wipe the corner of my mouth with the napkin.

I feel self-conscious telling them about our life—will they judge me? But I decide the truth is the best way to get to the answers. "We moved around a lot... I mean a lot. Usually like three schools a year."

"Why?" Milo's question makes me pause and think.

"Well, I'm not sure now. Once I was old enough to understand it wasn't normal, I started to realize that my mom wasn't like other moms." I shrug,

hoping they can understand it was all I knew. “My mom would go into these manic moods, where anything could set off her paranoia, and I thought she had some mental issues. But now that I know about you guys and what you say we are, I don’t know if everything I’d always thought is wrong.”

“You need to eat more. Tell us about the moods and paranoia,” Ares demands, his full attention on me.

I can’t do both, so I settle on giving him more information. “Like I said, at the time I thought she was bipolar or something, she would have anxiety attacks if she had to go out of the camper. She wasn’t always so bad. I’d say it got worse when I was about ten, maybe twelve.” I shovel a bite in my mouth.

Ares steeples his fingers, covering his lips. “Do you know the event that precipitated the change?”

“Not really, I can’t even remember what city we were in. I know it wasn’t long after I was noticed in school for scoring high on a test—you know, one of those whole grade level tests for the state?”

“Got noticed how?” Milo questions.

I feel a slight flush in my cheeks, so I look at my plate. “They made a big deal about my score, sent a letter home with me saying I was eligible to test up into another grade.” My confession is met with silence. I push the rice around my plate. Do they think I’m bragging? I always felt kinda funny about being called smart. It’s nothing I do, it’s just something that is. I can’t help that it’s easier for me to retain useless information.

Finally, I hear a deep chuckle, and I look up and meet Dante’s light amber eyes. “I always go with the D, C, D method.” I frown, unsure of what he means. “When we have to do those tests I just fill in random bubbles.” He shrugs his shoulders like it’s no big deal. I lift my lips in a small smile. I know he’s trying to make me feel better.

“Do you think that was the reason she became more... paranoid?” Milo asks, drawing us back to the topic.

“I’ve never really thought about the why, before she disappeared I always thought it was just who she was.” My hands fall to my lap as I gaze out in front of me. “I came home from work one night and she was gone, and so was some of her stuff. At first, I thought she might have had an episode, and was hiding out or something.” Thinking back to that day, I wonder why I didn’t go out and start looking for immediately. I shake my head, there’s no use wondering now, it won’t do any good.

“It was only a day or two later when you asked me over for the first time. I’ve been a little overwhelmed with everything going on to actually think about everything, especially from years ago. I thought she abandoned me.” Guilt eats at my stomach, if I hadn’t been so self-absorbed I would have given this more thought. I drop my head into my hands, pulling my hair.

A heavy palm lands on my back. “It’s okay Laura, we’ll figure it out together.” Milo glances from me to the others, including them in the promise.

I blow out a breath, tears prickling my eyes. “I should have known right away, she didn’t even go outside anymore.”

“How was she right before it happened? Any changes in her behavior?” Ares leans forward, his elbows on the table.

I nod my head, wiping under my nose with the napkin. “She had been sleeping a lot more than usual, right after we moved here she would sleep all the time.” I sit up in my seat remembering the night I woke up. “There’s something else. One night I woke up and I swear I heard her whispering. I thought she was getting sicker, you know, but I was so sure she was talking to someone, so I got up to listen. But the floor made a noise and she went completely silent. Maybe there was someone there with her?”

Ares looks at Dante. “I think your mom knew what you are, hell she had to know something. I think there’s a reason she hasn’t ever told you, and why she kept moving you guys. But I can’t figure out what it is. I’ve showed the picture you gave me to Maggie and her Infinity, but none of them recognize her and I can’t go posting it everywhere. Now that she’s missing it gives me more than enough reason to believe she was right to hide you. I don’t want to put you in any more danger than you already are,” Ares finishes, his eyes drilling into mine.

“But, then how will we find her?” My voice is small. Please don’t let them give up already. Milo’s hand, still on my back, starts making circles. It’s comforting but not what I need right now.

“We’ll find her Laura, we just don’t want too many people knowing we’re looking for her,” Dante adds, making me feel a little better.

“I think it’s best if only a few people we trust actually know that we’ve found you, and who you are to us,” Ares adds. If it will help find my mom I don’t care if I’m a secret, at least now I know the reason why.

Slowly the guys start eating again, my appetite is pretty much gone, but what I did eat was delicious. I push around my food waiting for them to finish. My mind starts to ponder the events of today and I remember how

Ollie acted in class. “Ollie.”

“Hmm?” He looks up at me, waiting.

“Why did you yell my name in class?”

His eyes go wide, and he swallows the bite in his mouth. “Did you feel funny?”

My brow furrows and I tilt my head. “Um...” I look at the others. Thinking about the moment I remember feeling his touch, the warmth from his hand on me.

“Did you feel different?” Dante probes.

“I remember thinking you felt warm, that I wanted to be warm,” I admit, and trying to keep the blush away from my cheeks, I down my glass of water.

“You were warming up, that’s for sure.” Ollie chuckles. “I could see little sparks of energy jumping off your skin. It looked like flint when you strike it.” Ollie wiggles his fingers in the air. “Like you hand fireworks dancing on your skin. It was awesome.”

I nearly spit the water I just drank out of my mouth. “What... you’re joking right?”

“No, I’m totally not joking, I was worried you were going to light up, so that’s why I yelled, to distract you.” Ollie raises his hand like he might reach out to me. “Can we try it again?” There’s a glint in his eyes that shows off how excited he is.

I look around the room. “Like right now?” I’m torn between not believing him and worrying we’ll set the room on fire.

“Yeah, come on.” He pushes away from the table and comes around to meet me. I’m still seated when his hand circles my arm and pulls me to stand. Ollie’s eyes roam over me from head to toe, before he grabs the loose fabric of the long sleeve shirt I’m wearing. “Can you take this off?” My eyes go wide, and my mouth drops open in surprise.

Ollie ducks when Ares reaches out and swats the back of his head. “Geez, you don’t have to get naked. I just want to see your skin, at school I could only see your hand. We need to know if it was only on your hand because that’s close to where I was touching, or if it was all over but I couldn’t see it because it was under your clothes.” He lowers his head, looking a little sheepish. “While I would love to remove your shirt, that is totally not what I meant.”

I push up the sleeves of my shirt, exposing my arms up to the elbows. “Let’s just see what happens first.” Ollie nods and biting his lip, he steps

closer.

First, I feel the slight brush of his fingers as he traces them from my hand then up my arm. Nothing happens. I do feel the warmth of his touch, but I don't have the same heated desire to grab on to the feeling. He steps even closer. "What were you thinking this morning? Was it different then?" Ollie asks in barely a whisper.

I nod, swallowing hard, what if something does happen? I'm afraid. "Okay good, try to think about what you were this morning, try to recreate that feeling." It's Dante's soothing voice from behind me. I know he's close, but he's not touching me.

"But what if something bad happens, what if I explode or something?" I can't help but express my fears, I'm scared all this is true. Not as afraid as I am that it's not, but still nervous enough that my fingers are shaking.

"Nothing bad will happen, even if you did explode Ares would stop it."

"Damn it Oliver, ignore him *Cara*. You aren't going to explode." Looking over my shoulder I find Ares, he's standing just a few feet away, near enough that should something go wrong he's close. I don't really want to think about all the powers he possesses that would make it possible for him to stop me from exploding if it were to happen. But I'm happy they are confident enough to think he could.

Ares nods his head to me, so I turn back to face Ollie. I close my eyes and think about the way his hand glides up and down my arm in a gentle caress, the heat trailing along with his touch and warming me from the inside. Just like in class this morning, I think about how much I like the heat, how I want to feel it all over me, how I want to feel that warmth inside me.

"Holy shit," Milo mutters before he gets shushed.

Opening my eyes slowly I look down at Ollie's hand, which is no longer moving on my arm, but his eyes are glued to my skin. Sparks of light are popping off my arm like tiny little sparklers under my skin. I can't feel anything but the warmth. Reaching up with my other hand I hover my finger over my arm. That arm is covered in dancing light too, when they get close together they arc to each other like a visible static charge.

"Whoa..." Ollie jerks once, his eyes leaping up to mine. "Can you control the arc?" His voice is soft with wonder. I shake my head, I have no idea.

"Is it all over?" I run my eyes down my legs, but I don't have any visible skin, so I reach for the hem of my shirt and lift. My skin is pale, but otherwise unremarkable. I let the shirt fall, a little disappointed.

Ares moves in closer, his dark eyes trained on my arms. “What are you feeling?”

“Nothing really, it’s like I can feel a shadow of the sparks but not any pain, do you know what I mean?”

Ares nods. “What changed? How did you make it happen?” His hand reaches out and one of the arcs jumps to him before he’s even touching me. He grunts, but the electricity snaps back to me.

“Does that hurt?” I whisper, afraid of his response.

Ares shakes his head quickly in denial. “Do you know how you made it happen?” His voice is firm, he wants me to concentrate on the question.

I stop to think of how I can explain it, “It’s like I said, I felt the heat of his touch and I wanted it, like I wanted to pull the feeling inside.” I shrug not knowing if I’m conveying it well enough.

“Okay, focus on that, can you pull it deeper, or pull more of it to you?” Ares is really close now, just out of range of the sparks.

I look up at Ollie. “What if I take too much? Is it his gift giving me this? Could I hurt him?”

Ollie grins down at me, his face smooth, showing no signs of concern. “Laura, you aren’t taking anything I wouldn’t give. Try it, see what happens. I promise you hurting me is the last thing that’s happening.” Ollie lets his head fall back and he closes his eyes.

Trusting him I grab the heat and tug it down deeper, pulling it into my core like I’m sucking in my stomach. Instinctually I lift my arm to shield my eyes, but it only brings the lights closer to my face. What I called sparklers before have now become bright flares, like you’d see in the sky for a fourth of July firework show.

“Uh oh...” I start to pull back from Ollie to break the connection and I push away the heat, hoping the sparks will go away. Instead of the heat leaving I feel it pooling in my hands, heavy pressure making my fingertips ache. One last shove has an arc of what looks like lightning shooting out my fingers and jumping right for the light switch. In the next moment a boom rocks the house, and all the lights die.

“Oh my God, oh my God, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” I chant in the darkness. Hands reach for me in the dark, but I shove them away. What did I just do? I can’t do that again, what if it would have hit one of them, what if it did hit one of them? I back away from where I think they are. “Ollie, Ares... Milo, Dante, are you guys okay?” I can’t keep the panic and fear from my

voice.

“It’s fine Laura, just a little power surge. Relax, everyone is okay, are you okay?” Ares’s words are spoken calmly and I can feel him closing in on me. I know he has much better vision in the dark, so he’ll know exactly where I am.

“I’m okay. Are you sure you guys are okay? I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean...” I stop talking when I feel his cool palm land on my neck. Ares’s thumb traces up and down from my pulse point under my jaw to my collarbone.

“Shhh,” he whispers to me, his mouth at my temple. “Calm *Cara*, we are fine.”

“Ares?” I hear a woman calling his name from further in the house. “Merda, it’s dark... Ares.”

“Mia, you okay?” It’s Dante who answers. Ares still has his hand on my throat and his mouth at my temple. He’s breathing, but just barely.

“Yes, just a little shaken up, what was that?” Her voice is closer now, probably in the same room, or very close to it.

“We think it was a power surge. Here, let me get you a flashlight and I’ll help you get back to your room. Ares is checking out the generator. It should have already kicked on.”

“Oh, there you are. Thank you,” Mia’s replies.

I didn’t even think about her still being here. Does she live here with them too? My hand lifts and I clasp the fabric of Ares’s shirt, not caring that I’m wrinkling it. He belongs to me, she shouldn’t be here. As soon as the thoughts enter my mind, I shake my head in denial. He doesn’t belong to me, I just want him to, I want all of them to.

Ares closes the tiny distance between us, half of his body flush with the front of mine. “Shhhh,” he hushes me again, no louder than a breath.

“Do you think Ares will be able to get the lights back on?” Mia’s voice is receding into the house again as Dante leads her away. His reply is too quiet for me to register, but I do hear his low mumbling.

“Oliver, Milo, come wait with Laura while I go check on the generator.” Not even a second later a series of clicking starts as the lights begin to turn back on.

Narrowing my eyes, I blink several times, readjusting to the lights. When I can see again, my eyes land on the light switch on the wall. Black scorch marks mar the wall, extending out like tree roots, all tangled and intertwined.

“I’m so sorry.”

Ares places both of his hands on my shoulders, forcing me to look at him. “You have nothing to be sorry for.” His eyes stare deeply into mine.

I have a moment of panic, what if it happens again while he’s touching me? “I could have hurt you guys, burned down the house. You, you... shouldn’t be touching me.” Tears fall from my bottom lashes. Even though I told him not to touch me, it’s the last thing I want. I need his comfort.

Ares’s thumbs wipe away the traces of wetness on my cheek. “Oh Laura, that wasn’t anything. You should have seen me when I manifested. I think I even scared my parents.” Reaching up I grip his forearms, grateful for the connection. “You’ll see you just need a bit of practice and control.”

My eyes go wide. “I can’t control that. Did you see what I did? It was like lightening. You can’t control lightening.” My fingernails dig into his skin, he needs to understand, there isn’t anyway to harness that wildness, it almost felt sentient.

Ignoring me, he pries one of my hands from his arm, and leaving the other he turns. Taking a chance, I glance at them for the first time. Milo looks a little bewildered, but not angry, Ollie looks like his skin is barely containing him, like he’s about to burst at the seams with energy. “Are you okay?” I ask, taking a step in his direction.

Ollie nods really fast. “Just a little wired.” I peer over at Ares, concerned when Ollie’s eyes jump around the room, never landing on anything for more than a second. He shakes his head, his lips pursed in what looks like humor.

Dante returns moments later, his hair a little disheveled. His eyes search the room until they land on me. He sighs, his shoulders falling. “You okay?”

“Yes, I think so. You?”

Dante’s hand goes through his hair. “Fine just worried about you... guys,” he tacks on to the end. “Let’s get this cleaned up so Gloria doesn’t go on a warpath tomorrow, and then get ready for bed.” Everyone kicks into action at Dante’s suggestion.

I stand at the sink rinsing out the glasses and plates while Milo loads the dishwasher. Ares is in charge of leftovers, and Dante is stacking the dishes from the dining room onto the counter next to me. Ollie disappeared after a quick word with Ares, and he all but ran from the room.

TWENTY FIVE

Ares leads the way back to his bedroom with Milo, Dante, and me trailing behind him. He flips the switch on the wall, lighting the two bedside lamps. Only it looks different from this morning. There's an extra mattress on the floor next to the bed. It sits a little bit lower than the other right on the ground. Ares walks over to the wall and pushes to the left, revealing a neatly lined closet behind it. Why is his room full of secret little spaces? It makes me curious about the heavy curtains spanning from wall to wall that I've never seen opened.

Milo, already in gray sweats and a thin red shirt, drops onto the extra mattress and sighs. Dante looks down at his jeans and socks, then back to me. "I'm going to grab some shorts, does anyone need anything?"

I start to tell him no, but remember I need my bag, and we never did get to the laundry issue. It's late now, I really don't want to deal with it. "I need my bag, and I still need to do some laundry."

"Ares has laundry covered, I'll be right back." He turns and flees the room faster than his usual saunter.

"Thanks," Ares mutters acerbically under his breath. I turn to find him with his shoes already removed and placed among the rows of others, and his white shirt is unbuttoned, revealing a thin white undershirt beneath it. My throat goes a little dry, the shirt is tight, hinting at his body underneath. His belt is undone, but his dark pants are still fastened. He looks around the room, a look of disapproval on his face, his mouth tightening. I scan the room looking for what he's seeing, but I don't find anything out of place with the exception of the added bed. It's made up in the same dark sheets and a heavy gray comforter, just like the ones on his bed.

Ares draws my attention when he clears his throat, holding out a long black garment bag. I reach for it on instinct. It's heavy, my arm droops with the weight. Repositioning my hold, I use both hands. "This stuff is for you," he says with his arms folded behind his back and his feet spread wide apart.

"Is this my laundry?" I fold the bag over my arm and pull the zipper down. What's inside isn't mine, not even close. "I think my stuff got mixed up with someone else's."

"No, everything in there is yours, it's just not your laundry." Ares doesn't take his eyes off me, he's waiting for my reaction.

"If it's not my laundry, then how could it be mine?" I toss the heavy bag on the bed and turn to face off with him again.

"It's yours because I said it was," Ares challenges, an eyebrow raised.

"Oh, I'm sorry." My hands go to my hips, "I wasn't aware that the mighty Ares had decreed it so."

The corner of his lip tips up, but he schools his features immediately. "You need a few things, I provided a few things. That's how it works."

I tilt my head and open my mouth, my finger tapping the side of my head. "Oh, I see how you think this is going to work." Stepping in his direction I add, "I don't need handouts." My voice goes from mocking to anger filled.

"It isn't a handout," Ares grits out between his teeth.

"Then what exactly is it? Are you trying to say you don't like my clothes then?" Milo makes a choking sound from over on the bed. He pounds his hand over his heart a few times, clearing his throat.

My attention back on Ares, I begin tapping my foot. He raises his chin. "Not particularly, no. I don't care for your clothes."

Milo adds a loud groan, not even trying to mask that he's reacting to Ares's comment.

"Well, I'm so sorry I don't live up to your standards Mr. Costa, but we all aren't afforded the luxury of a large bank account." Sarcasm drips from my words.

Ares's nostrils flare his arms coming out from behind his back. "Well Miss Fallen, that's not true in your case now, is it?" Dumbfounded I shake my head, of course it's true. Ares's face slides into a smug grin. "You see, since you're part of our Infinity, you're also entitled to all of this." Ares spreads his arms wide and spins slowly. I can't tell if he's offering himself up, or the house and everything in it.

"Oh no I'm not. Shit doesn't work like that," I argue, my arms crossing

over my chest.

“But it does. That goes for any Infinity, not just ours. Once my dad found my mom it was the same way. So, you can argue all you want, but it won’t do you any good. If we weren’t trying to keep your identity a secret, you would have already been added to all our accounts.” Ares mimics my stance, his arms crossing over his chest. I note four crescent shaped indents on his forearm. Those are from me grabbing his arm earlier. I want to bare my teeth at him and mark him more. The thought is so foreign I look away. Shocked by my own reaction.

“He’s telling the truth Laura.” Ollie walks back in, much more himself. His steps are slower, and the frantic look is gone from his eyes.

“Yeah, but it’s different for all the others, they probably bring something to the group,” I add, a little of the heat from moments ago draining away.

“You are bringing something to the group,” Milo chimes in.

I look over at him and roll my eyes. “What, a nineteen seventies Winnebago?” I throw my hands in the air looking between them.

“There is that, but I think he’s talking more about what you’re giving to the group. Without you, we aren’t even a real Infinity, you already brought Ares back to us.” Ollie drops on the bed next to Milo. Surprised, and a little flattered if I’m honest, I close my mouth. I can’t bring myself to look at Ares, what will he think about Ollie’s statement?

“Do you need the bathroom first?” the man in question asks, ignoring the conversation.

“No, you go ahead.”

Ares’s grasps the back of my neck and gives me a gentle squeeze. “We’re all in this together, if anyone of us needed something it would get handled the exact same way. None of us are keeping a tally.” He releases me and disappears into the bathroom seconds later.

Deciding not to bother fighting them on the clothes situation—I’m sure there will be much bigger battles to win—I push the sides of the bag open and search through the contents. It’s mostly jeans and t-shirts. I blush when I start pulling the hangers out and find several dainty sets of under clothes tucked away in the back. There are even a couple pairs of silky black pajamas included. I run my fingers over the sleek fabric, it feels like cool water against my fingertips, and they will probably feel amazing on. Ignoring the bras and panties, I grab a pair of jammies and wait for my turn in the bathroom.

Dante and Milo are talking about some zombie show they watch, while Ollie chimes in every once in a while, but mostly he looks like he's half asleep already. I'm feeling pretty tired myself, so I lean against the headboard and close my eyes. I feel the bed shift a few times as they move around, still chatting easily. My mind starts to wander, it was only a few days ago I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. I didn't have a real future beyond taking care of my mom. Now I have four people in my life who are promising to help me understand what kind of life I'll actually be able to have, and they'll be with me for the entire journey. I know I have a long way to go before I truly understand what being in an Infinity means, but I'm excited for the chance to learn.

Now I just need to figure out what happened to my mom, maybe if we find her, she'll be able to tell more about why she kept us on the move. Maybe we'll be capable of helping her, so she can feel safe and live a normal life. Inwardly I roll my eyes, when has my life ever been normal? And it doesn't look like that's changing anytime soon.

What will she think of the guys? Did she know I had someone out there looking for me? I get a hollow feeling in my stomach when I think about where she could be, or what could be happening to her. I take a deep breath, vowing to find her. Together, with my guys, I'm confident we'll be able to do it.

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I am; a mother, a wife, a reader and a writer. In that order. My truth, I believe in real life happily ever afters, but you have to work for them.

I write what I want to read, romance. Be it hot and steamy or slow burn, crossing several sub-genres.

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