

A PARANORMAL REVERSE HAREM SERIES



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INFINITY
CHRONICLES

BOOK THREE

ALBANY WALKER

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A PARANORMAL REVERSE HAREM SERIES

ALBANY WALKER

ALBANY PUBLISHING

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CHAPTER 1

I shake my hands to dispel the static charge, which is making my fingers feel numb. I've been working on controlling my abilities for the past two weeks, two long ass weeks, and I've hardly made any progress.

"Remind me why I need to do this every day, you guys barely even use your powers." I'm hot, sweaty, and annoyed with myself. We do the same thing daily with the same results.

"We're doing this, so you don't turn into a human sparkler at school, and so you can learn control," Milo tells me. I take a deep breath. He doesn't deserve my snark, I'm mostly mad at myself.

"Why can't I get the hang of it?" I'm more tired now than I was when I was going to school and working five days a week.

"You'll get it Laura, it takes time," he promises. "Now, try closing your eyes and thinking about which ability you want to call forward."

I sigh but close my eyes anyway. "No more electricity, I feel like my insides are vibrating," I address Milo, peeking at him with one eye slit open.

"Do you want to try shifting?"

My eyes snap open and I glare at him. "No, I don't want to try shifting. Who knows if I can really shift, and what if I do and I can't figure out how to get back? No." This has been a sore topic with us ever since I realized the itching feeling I've had since I bonded with Dante is another ability trying to manifest.

Milo lifts his palms in surrender. "Okay, not today. But you will have to do it soon."

"Not if I can help it," I mutter under my breath, already closing my eyes

again. I reach for the darkness I associate with Ares. I let the cool tendrils of inky smoke wrap around my center, taking a deep breath and sucking in my stomach as the power coils within me. Ares's ability comes the easiest, since it never really leaves me. I think it's because we're already bonded. It feels almost natural to seek out the shadows dancing in the corners of the room, hidden in all the crevasses. Coaxing the shades from their resting spots, I call them to me. Even with my eyes closed, I can tell the light shining from the chandelier above is dimmer. I haven't managed to shadow walk, but if I'm practicing with Ares or he's near enough, I can astral project.

After a few seconds of holding the darkness, I release it and my breath. I wipe away the new sweat beading on my upper lip and at my temples.

"That was fantastic Laura, you called the shadows right to you," Milo praises, sounding pleased. "I think you're done for today." He hands me an icy bottle of water. Before cracking the lid, I run the cold plastic over my forehead.

"How did you draw the short straw? You worked with me yesterday." I bump my shoulder into Milo. He's solid as a rock, but I don't mind. Milo is the most reserved of my guys, so any chance I get to touch him is okay with me.

"I volunteered." He looks down at me while we're making our way down the hall from the downstairs gym.

"You did?" I can't keep the surprise from my voice.

"Why wouldn't I?" He stops before reaching the stairs and tilts his head at an angle.

"Because even I don't like myself when I have to train." I know I can be a pouty brat.

Milo rolls his eyes, but a smirk lifts his lips. "You're not that bad." I give him a side-eyed look, letting him know I think he's full of shit.

"I'm going to grab a shower," I inform him once we make it to the top of the stairs.

"Okay, I'll let the guys know." Milo stops near the entrance of the kitchen. I can hear Ollie and Dante, their voices mingling with the television.

I almost just walk past him, but at the last minute I decide to lean up on my toes and give him a peck on the side of his jaw. "Thanks Milo." I don't stick around to see his reaction, instead I rush down the hall heading toward our room.



In the solitude of the shower, I find myself thinking about how much has changed since I moved to Canton. In some ways, my life was so much simpler before I came here, when I was clueless about who and what I was. When I had no idea my mom's crazy, paranoid behavior wasn't anything more than her own brand of insanity.

Finding out I wasn't the normal girl I'd been living as my entire life—well, as normal as I could be with a reclusive mother who insisted that I be invisible—hasn't exactly been easy. Finding out my mom really did have reasons to move us around every three months, and to hide us like she was on the most-wanted list, was even more of a shock.

We've been running from the man who should have protected her my entire life. A man who decided he wanted my mother to himself and all the power that came with her. A man that might be dead.

Being a Synergist to an Infinity is supposed to be a blessing. We are the catalyst that bolsters our pairs' powers, and tempers their abilities when they become more than they can handle on their own.

Synergist don't develop powers of their own. Instead, we are made to act almost as a filter for our pairs' abilities. Once we meet the men of our group, our power manifests. Typically, a Synergist will only have one ability, but I, however, have two—so far.

Dante finding and introducing me to my three other pairs has been the only thing in these last few months that has kept me from losing my mind. Without them, I still wouldn't even know what I was, nor would I have any chance of figuring out what happened to my mom. Despite my mom never telling me what I was, I have to wonder if she brought me here so I would be able to discover my destiny.

“Hey Muenster, you almost done?” Ollie calls into the bathroom.

I shut the water off, then reply, “All done.” Reaching past the shower stall I grab a fluffy black towel from the shelf, bringing up to my face first. The door is closed, but that doesn't mean much around here. I've been walked in on, and walked in on someone, more than I care to say. I make quick work of drying my hair and wrapping the damp cloth around my body.

“Dinner's ready. Do you want me to wait for you?” Ollie's voice is muffled through the door.

“Yeah, just a second,” I holler, loud enough so he’ll hear me. “What are we having?” I slip my legs into a pair of buttery soft black leggings and snag the t-shirt I stole from Dante’s section of the closet, before slipping it over my head and pulling my hair free. “You can come in.”

The door opens in the next second and Ollie leans against the frame, his arms folded over his chest. “Hey, what’s for dinner?” I repeat, thinking he didn’t hear me, or I didn’t hear his response.

“Rosa and Gloria made a pasta dish, not really sure what it’s called.” I watch Ollie in the mirror as I drag the brush through my long hair. He looks relaxed, but I can see the swaths of darkness under his eyes, and the slump of his shoulders.

“You okay?”

A grin immediately lifts his lips, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. He shakes away my concern, leaving the doorframe and heading in my direction. “I’m good, how are you?” I track his movements in the mirror as he sets his chin on my shoulder.

Spinning to face him, I search his eyes. “It shouldn’t always be about me Ollie. I worry about you guys too.”

Looking back down at me, he grabs a chunk of my damp hair and examines it. “I know Laura,” his use of my real name shows me he’s taking me seriously, “but I’m fine, better than fine. I promise.” Before I can push him further, he leans in to steal a kiss. His lips are soft, pillowing over mine. Ollie is a tease when he kisses, always pulling away right when I think he’s going to deepen the kiss.

I know he’s distracting me, but I don’t stop him. I lean into him, returning the affection. His palms slide up over my bare arms to cup my shoulders, heat trailing behind his touch. A shiver makes its way up my back, following the wake of the burn.

I sigh, enjoying his warmth and kisses. He doesn’t push any further, doesn’t move his hands from my arms. He’s content with just kissing. Knowing he’d never press for more than I was ready to for puts me at ease. I place my hands on his chest, feeling the softness of his t-shirt under my palms, and his tight body beneath.

Ollie has the physique of a swimmer, all long lines of sinewy muscle. He drags in a breath as I run my hands up and over his shoulders, pulling him closer. “Damn you feel good,” he confesses, nipping my bottom lip. I don’t say it out loud, but I feel the exact same way. Heat flows between us and any

moisture on my skin evaporates, but the humidity in the room doubles, making it feel hard to breathe.

Way too soon he pulls away, and his eyes are closed as he places his forehead against mine. Once he catches his breath, he wraps his hands around my back and draws me into his embrace. I tuck my head under his chin, rest my hands low around his back, and hold him just as tightly.

“Hungry?” Ollie prompts when I let go.

I shrug, since food is no longer high on my list. “I could eat.” I give him one final squeeze before stepping back. When I look up at him, there’s a flush to his cheeks and the dark circles under his eyes have lessened. Guilt settles in my stomach. A few kisses and he looks ten times healthier, I need to manage my time between the guys better. I’ve been neglecting him. Probably Milo too.

“Wanna play a game after we eat? We could try that new one. Milo likes that one, right?” I offer, thinking a few hours sitting between them while playing would be good for all of us.

“Sure, lets go before someone comes looking for us.”



The slamming of several textbooks closing pulls me from my thoughts. It’s Friday, and I only have one more class before I can get out of here for the weekend.

While school isn’t as terrible as it used to be, it still sucks, just for different reasons now. I don’t have to wander the halls like a ghost, but the notoriety of being close with three of the most popular boys at school has its drawbacks.

I think the closeness of our group has the school more confused than anything else. No one knows why I, of all people, was accepted by them so quickly. It doesn’t help that Ollie is hanging all over me half the time, and the other half I’m either staring at Dante like he hung the moon, or Milo like he’s my own superman.

The halls are loud as everyone rushes to their final class of the day.

Thanksgiving is next week, so we only have classes on Monday and Tuesday, I think everybody is already in vacation mode.

Making my way to art, I feel a sense of excitement. Spending time with any of the guys alone is a rarity, and knowing I'll have Dante all to myself for the next hour puts a skip in my step. Not that we'll really be alone, but at least his parents won't be there.

It's been a little bit of a struggle always having Rosa, William, and Mal around. Don't get me wrong, I like them, and they've accepted me as if I was one of their own. But it's been a huge change from only ever being with the guys to always having parents around, and it's not just Ares and Dante's parents, because Milo and Ollie's families are stopping by all the time too.

Their relationships with their parents are not the typical teenager and parent arrangement. With the males gaining their full abilities and identifiers at sixteen, it's the equivalent of a norm turning eighteen. You're considered an adult, ready to move out, start a life of your own.

One bonus about Rosa reclaiming her house was that Mia was able to find the perfect house to rent within a day of their return. Coincidence, not likely.

Setting my backpack on the floor I slide onto my stool, watching the door for Dante's arrival. I know he's coming before I see him. Ever since our bonding I have a keen sense of him, I get this tingle under my skin when he's close.

His eyes meet mine the moment he rounds the door, he doesn't have to look for me, since he knows right where I am. A blush steals over my cheeks, I still get a little breathless knowing he's mine.

Dante's deep brown hair is a little wild, like he used his hands to push it back all day. It's gotten a little longer since I first met him, but it suits him. His amber eyes are focused on me and I almost squirm, all that attention can be overwhelming. I watch as his broad chest lifts while he drags in a deep breath, his eyes closing slowly as he does. His steps never falter as he continues over to me.

His blink is slow when his eyes open again, and he bites his bottom lip, his straight white teeth a little sharper than what someone would consider normal. I know it's part of him, part of his tiger, no one else would notice the small difference, but I do.

Dante leans forward and pulls his stool out from under the desk we share, his forehead bumps against mine. To anyone else paying attention, it might look like an accident, like he just got a little too close, but I know it's his way

of greeting me.

“Hi.” My voice is a little breathy, but I don’t even care.

He pulls his seat a little closer to me so once he sits our arms are touching from elbow to wrist, and his big hand covers mine. The noise he makes, a low rumble, is his response.

Mr. Adams calls for the class’s attention after the second bell rings. We’ve been working on clay for the past week. “If I haven’t given you a rough grade, I need to see your projects before you leave this afternoon. We only have two days next week if you are glazing or painting to get your final mark.”

My sad excuse for a mug is lopsided, I can’t seem to get it smooth, but Mr. Adams gave me a B plus for effort, if nothing else. I still have to put the final coat of glaze on it and place it in the kiln, but I think I should get a B on the final too.

Dante is working on a small lantern. He shaped the top like a pagoda with four holes on each side, and it’s large enough for a small candle to be placed inside. Apparently, his artistic ability extends beyond drawing.

When Mr. Adams is done speaking, we all head to the connecting room to gather our projects, and it’s a tense time for most of the kids in the class. I don’t think a day has passed where someone’s clay hasn’t been damaged. Often, it’s because they didn’t cover it well enough, or because it dried out too fast. If it wasn’t for Dante helping me, mine would have been among the casualties.

It’s hard to focus on my work when he’s beside me, but I force myself to pay attention to my mug. I’ve picked out a sage green glaze that looks milky when I paint it on. I can only hope it will turn green once I’ve fired it, right now it looks pretty bad.

Dante has already done his final glaze firing, so his project is done. After a quick inspection he gathers his lantern and takes it up to the teacher’s desk. Mr. Adams picks it up and looks it over very closely. He traces his finger over the seam where two colors he’s painted on it meet, nodding his head in approval.

Dante pushes his hands deep into his pockets and his shoulders round out a bit, making him look a little smaller, a little unsure. He looks more like the seventeen-year-old boy he actually is, more so than he usually does. It’s easy to forget how young he, Ollie, and Milo are.

Making myself look away I continue painting my mug. It’s not long

before Dante returns to our desk, his project still in the teacher's hands. "Need any help?" he offers, glancing at my sad little mug.

His question reminds me of the time Mr. Adams asked him to help me with my portrait. "Oh, so you're willing to help me now?" I bump my shoulder into his playfully. I don't need him to know how humiliated I felt that day.

Dante's eyes narrow slightly, like he's thinking about them same thing. "I wanted to help back then too."

I pause my painting and look up at him. Dante's face is close to mine and he looks sincere, maybe even a little sheepish. "It sure didn't seem like you wanted to help me." I force some lightness into my tone.

Dante's hand lands on mine when I begin painting again, stopping me. "I was afraid to get too close to you." His voice is pitched low and he's leaning over my shoulder. Anyone watching would assume he's helping me. But what he's really doing is frazzling my nerves.

"Why?" I keep my eyes on my project, his hand steadying mine as he brushes the glaze over the clay.

"I was trying to keep my distance. I recognized what you were to me the moment I was close enough to smell you." He takes a deep breath, demonstrating his heightened ability. "But you didn't show any sign you recognized me. I was afraid I was wrong. That only my animal wanted you." Dante brushes his cheek against the top of my head, still holding my hand as he dips the brush back into the glaze.

I swallow, I can't help but be affected by his touch and the deep rumble of his voice. "I didn't know it at the time, but I think I had given up ever finding you. Ares got his mark so long ago, and he never found you. I thought it would always just be us. I was too afraid to hope."

I turn then, our faces only inches apart. After searching his eyes and seeing the truth, I lean forward and press my lips against his. I don't care that we're in class, or that the teacher could see. I don't care that students might notice and set off a heap of rumors. I know I want him to know I'm here, that he doesn't have to worry about not finding me. He already has.

I pull away quickly, focusing back on my mug. A fissure of regret seeps into me, I hope he's not mad. I wasn't trying to cause any drama. I don't hear any catcalls or hushed whispers, so I think my stolen kiss went unnoticed anyway.

Dante scoots his stool a little closer so his chest brushes against my back.

I let out a small sigh, if it bothered him, he surely wouldn't be getting closer.

When the class is over Dante snags my hand in his and stalks down the hall, with students moving out of his way without any prompting. I glance at his profile, his face is impassive. He looks bored and a little angry, he's definitely got the bad boy vibe happening today. He peers down at me when he senses my stare, his eyes softening when they land on mine. "Everything okay?"

Keeping pace beside him I nod. "Yeah, fine." What else could I say? I was just checking you out?

Dante doesn't question me again as we make our way out to the car. We get a few looks on the way, some are probably people just noticing his presence, but I think our intertwined hands probably attract a few extra looks.

"Hey Muenster." I glance over my shoulder to see Ollie. He's jogging to catch up with us.

"Hi Ollie." He eyes my hand folded in Dante's. Ollie's eyes take on a wicked gleam right before he snatches my other hand in his.

I have a moment where I feel like a kindergartener who has to hold hands walking through the halls. It passes quickly, but I almost tug my hand free from both of them. The thoughts of what people might say are filling my head, but that passes even faster. What does it matter what these people think? It's not like I'm hiding my relationship from anyone that matters. All the guys' parents know, and they've accepted it. So who cares, right?

I lift my chin in a rare show of defiance. I'm exactly where I want to be, I don't care what any of these people think of me. If it's okay with Ollie and Dante, then it's more than okay with me.

My bravery fades a little when we make it outside. It's not the same as being in the overcrowded hallways. Out here, in the parking lot, I feel like I'm on display. Ollie doesn't miss a beat, and he releases my hand and wraps his arm around my neck instead. Dante is still towing me along, and now he's pulling Ollie too. He doesn't bother releasing me, even with Ollie hanging off my neck.

My heart is thumping fast in my chest by the time we make it to the car, not from exertion, but a little bit of nerves and excitement. Dante unlocks the passenger side door and opens it for me, while Ollie reaches past me and pushes the seat forward so I have to climb in the back. I do so without complaint, assuming he's getting in the front.

I feel his fingers trace over the back of my thigh as I bend to crawl in. I jolt a little, surprised by his forwardness in public.

“Knock it off, you’re going to have people talking about her,” Dante scolds, his voice low.

“Oh, come on! It’s not like they can see. Besides, they already are, might as well give them something to talk about.” Ollie drops into the seat next to me, and he looks in my direction before rolling his eyes dramatically.

I bite my lip, I should be worried about Dante’s words, but I don’t have the energy to care. I’m done with letting other people tell me how I should act, how I should behave. I’ve been invisible my entire life. I’m not anymore. “I don’t care what they say.” My voice is small, but I hear the truth to the words.

Dante slides into the driver’s seat, his eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror. “You would if you knew what they were saying,” he counters, his jaw tight.

“No, I don’t think I would. It’s either close to the truth, or outright lies.” I raise my brow at him in challenge.

Dante spins so he’s leaning over the seat to talk to me, and Ollie grabs my hand. “I’m not worried about what they’re saying. I’m worried one of them might try something with you because they think they could.” There’s so much left unsaid in that sentence and I’m pretty sure I get the gist of it. The boys all think I’m easy. Giving it up to Ollie, maybe even Dante and Milo now. So he’s worried one of them will try something with me because they think I’m okay with hooking up.

I almost snort at the idea. If I was easy, I’d have slept with Ares one of the many times we’ve been alone together, or Dante for that matter. If Dante wasn’t so serious right now, I’d roll my eyes and give Ollie a run for his money with the dramatics, but I can see the tautness in his jaw, the slight narrowing of his eyes—he’s not in a kidding mood.

I soften my expression, and give Dante a small shrug. “People will talk Dante. One day I’m holding Ollie’s hand, the next day yours, maybe even at the same time. I don’t want to hide anymore, I don’t want to constantly worry about what people are thinking.”

Dante’s face changes the moment the words are out of my mouth. He reaches his hand over the seat and brushes his fingers against my cheek. “I don’t want anyone bothering you. I don’t want them thinking they can touch you like that.”

With my free hand I cover his fingers on my face, bring them over to my lips, and kiss his knuckles. Dante's lips part. "I know you're just trying to protect me, but I can handle it, okay? Maybe if my mom thought I was strong enough to handle the truth, we wouldn't be in the situation we're in now." I hope my kiss is enough to tell him I'm not upset. I want them to understand I'm not nearly as fragile as they think.

The passenger side door opens and Milo drops his bag on the floor, and then himself into the seat. "Sorry I'm late, the coach was trying to convince me to wrestle again." Milo looks around the car and his brows furrow. "Everything okay?"

"Hi Milo, I missed you today," I tell him while I still have the confidence running through my veins. "Everything's fine," I add, answering his question.

His eyes go a little wide, but he can't hide the smile that blooms on his lips. "Missed you too." Milo's voice is low, almost a whisper.

Dante turns to face the front window as the purr of the engine rumbles to life. It takes us a few minutes to get out of the crowded parking lot, but before I know it, we're speeding down the road that will take us back home, and to Ares.

CHAPTER 2

*M*y hands are braced on my hips as I stare across the room at Ollie. His light hair is pulled back into a messy knot on top of his head. On most guys it would look ridiculous, but he looks amazing. The curve of his jaw and the blade of his cheekbone stand out more, and he couldn't be mistaken for anything other than purely masculine.

As I watch him, his cool green eyes rake over me and I want to squirm, but I cock my hip out instead, my brow raised in a challenge. "It's my turn to help you train."

"Are you sure we should be working on electricity? It's always so much stronger when I'm working with you."

"Yes, we need to see what you can do," he tells me, fully confident in both of us.

Still reluctant, I reach for the power I feel within, and it's right there on the surface. A crackling static rushes over my body. "Okay, I'm ready."

"Good, I want you to push *a little bit* of what you feel out. Make sure you direct it."

"Sure, because it's that easy," I mutter, closing my eyes to shut out how distracting he is. I picture the kiddie pool filled with sand a few feet away. I point my finger at the sand, visualizing the energy shooting in that direction, and give it a little push.

"Whoa, whoa, too much," comes Ollie's urgent warning.

I stop the flow immediately and the energy snaps back, coiling inside me. I grit my teeth, the vibration is almost more than I can handle. I yank my eyes open as panic overwhelms me. What if I can't hold the energy, what if it explodes out of me again and fries the wiring? Or worse, hurts someone?

Ollie approaches, his steps slow and measured. “It’s okay Laura,” he soothes me, his voice calm and gentle.

“Don’t touch me,” I warn, shaking my head. I’d probably sizzle his heart if he touched me right now.

“Laura, look at me.”

I’m scanning the room, looking for any place to go to get away from him, or anyone else I might hurt. When my eyes finally land on him, he’s way too close. I back up, the hair on my head tingling.

“It’s okay, listen to my voice, listen.” He comes even closer. “Your ability is tied to me, right? You can feel it, how it binds us together.”

Biting the inside of my lip hard enough to get the metallic tang of blood in my mouth, I nod. Not sure where he’s going with this.

“It won’t hurt me, it won’t hurt you. We have to learn to manage it, okay?”

“It does hurt.” My voice comes out as a whine.

“That’s because you’re holding it too tight. I know it’s hard, but you’re going to have to let it go. Imagine it dissolving. Don’t send it out, don’t absorb it, just let it fizzle out.”

Looking down at my hands, I see the energy covering my skin. Sparks of light shimmer up my arms and over my chest. I suck in a breath and the burn intensifies, and realizing what I’ve done, I blow it out quickly. Instead, I imagine each spark bursting into the air, tiny little pops of light that don’t do any damage, just fill the air with a static charge.

Slowly it begins to work, and the heaviness in my chest dissipates until I’m able to feel individual strands of energy pulsing inside me.

“That’s it Muenster,” Ollie assures me. When I’m confident I have control over the remaining energy, I focus on the pool of sand and send a single bolt of power out. It hits the sand with a small crack.

I fall back on my butt the moment it’s gone, exhaustion overtaking me. I groan and drop back so I’m lying on the hard floor of the gym.

Ollie’s sheepish face comes into view above me. “Too much, too soon?” A bark of laughter erupts from me, but it ends on another groan. Everything hurts.



“One thing I can say about our little experiment,” I pause, before shoving the spoonful of Nutella into my mouth, “is that I think I finally figured out how to take just a little power at a time and send it out in smaller blasts.” The sweet chocolaty goodness hits my tongue and I moan around the spoon. My eyes close in bliss, I get the hype.

“Let’s focus on the positives then, shall we.” Ollie takes the empty spoon from my fingers and dips it back into the container, before returning it to me. I roll my lips in to hide the grin, I know a bribe when I see it.

“You’re double dipping,” I tell him, but he rolls his eyes and hands me the brimming spoon.

“Do we have to keep going?” This little reprieve was just a break. We’d only been at it five minutes and I still need to work on my other ability.

“Yes, but we’ll take it easy,” he offers after taking the spoon from me and dropping it into the sink.

I hop down from the stool feeling better after the sugar. As we make our way back downstairs, I’m relieved that I only have one other ability. It’s gotten almost impossible to ignore the draw I feel toward Dante’s powers, but I think it’s because we’re bonded.

“Okay, Milo said you have the shadow under control, how about going invisible?”

“I thought you said we’re going to take it easy?” I scoff, doubt clear in my tone. That’s something I’ve only managed when I’m near Ares. When I’m with the others, I feel some of the emotions they’re feeling. I can even adjust my sight so I can see in exceptionally low light. But the ghost girl routine only seems to work when I’m pulling directly from Ares. “You know the shadow stuff comes much easier when I’m with the dark lord.”

Ollie snickers. “I’m going to tell him you call him that.”

“Don’t, it will only make him cockier.”

“You’re right, that’s something we don’t need.” Ollie bobs his head. “We need to see if you can reach that level of power when you aren’t with the catalyst.”

I know this, he and Ares have already explained it to me, so I don’t really have a reason to pout, but I do. Crossing my arms over my chest, I close my

eyes and let out a long-suffering sigh. I'd much rather be cuddled between Milo and Dante on the couch where I left them.

"Now, feel yourself fading," Ollie instructs.

I open one eye and glare at him. "That is not how it works." I snap my eye shut again. Clearing my mind, I focus on the strand of something inside me that is uniquely Ares. Once I feel like I have a good grasp on it, I let his power come over me. Ares's ability is deep, I don't know any other way to describe the vastness of it. It feels as if I'm only touching a small piece of what he's capable of. Dropping my arms to my sides I take a step into the darkness, I don't move my physical body, just release myself into what I know to be Ares's ability.

"That's it," Ollie whispers. It's almost enough to distract me, but I squeeze my eyes shut. He feels too warm, like his heat is calling to me. Another step and I'm floating in a cool pool, where Ollie's heat is no longer threatening to pull me away.

I open my eyes slowly and the room looks much darker. Everything is in shades of gray instead of the vibrant colors I know it to be. Ollie's aura is the only brightness I see. He glows orange and yellow like the flicker of a candle flame. I think about feeling those colors on my skin, to see if they're as warm as Ollie is. But that's all it takes to have me next to him, a single thought, and I transported from one place to the next.

Feeling a little woozy, I reach out for him. The moment my hand makes contact with his skin I return to myself with a jolt. The brightness of the room is overwhelming, the sounds I hadn't realized that had been muted return in full force. I hear my heart thumping, hear the sway of my hair as I shake my head, which sends an ache through my skull. "Ugh, I think I might be sick." My voice sounds like I'm yelling, but I know I'm not. I brace my hands on my head and squeeze my eyes shut as tightly as I can.

Ollie places a gentle hand on my shoulder and my skin prickles under his touch. I pull away, it's all too much too fast. I don't know if my legs give out, or if I just let myself fall to the floor, but that's where I find myself. Again. Sitting with my knees lifted, so they cradle my forehead.

"I'll get Ares," Ollie murmurs. I don't know how much time has passed, but I can hear their rushed footsteps in the carpeted hallway as they return. The closer Ares gets, the less off-kilter I feel. It's like his energy is pouring into me. I lift my head from my knees and watch him with heavy eyes as he rounds the doorframe.

It's such a relief to see him, to feel his strength filling me, that I sigh. "What happened?" Ares demands, his voice harsh. I wince and make a shushing sound. He kneels beside me, his hand pressing against my forehead like I'm a child with a fever.

"She did it. She was able to," Ollie waves his hands, "turn invisible. She was only gone a few seconds." Ollie keeps his voice low, but his excitement is clear.

I lift my hand and pat it against Ares's mouth lazily. I feel completely drained, exhausted. "Shush," I tell them again. "My head hurts." I let my head fall against Ares's chest, leaning into him. As soon as the connection forms, I tug on the darkness that calls to me whenever we're close, when he's sharing his ability with me. Ares makes a grunting sound, but lifts his hand so his palm is cradling my head against him.

I tilt my face up to look at him and he kisses my forehead. "You're okay," he reassures me, maybe himself too.

Once I feel like I can take a deep breath without sprawling on the floor, I lick my lips and tell him, "Thank you."

"Do you know what happened?" Ares dismisses my thanks, going right for answers.

"Do you mind if we get off the floor?" I meant for it to come out as a joke, but he snaps into action. Cradling me into his arms, he lifts me off the floor and takes us over to the other half of the room. Ares sits on the end of a weight bench with me still snuggled against his chest. I curl into him, no longer needing the energy he was supplying, but craving his touch anyway.

"What happened?" he asks again, his patience gone.

I drag in a deep breath. "It was like Ollie said, I was finally able to go ghost." I pause, taking another breath. "I was thinking about how bright Ollie was, so I wanted to get closer to him. But I didn't walk to him, I was just there, right next to him. But then I felt sick, like I would throw up and pass out at the same time."

"Jesus Christ, you fucking shadow walked?"

I snap my hands over my ears again. "Do you have to yell?" I glare at him, catching a glimpse of Ollie standing in the doorway with Milo by his side. Ollie's eyes are wide as he stares at me, his hand covering his mouth. He's worried we overdid it, especially after taking in so much of his energy.

"Sorry," Ares grumbles, his voice much lower.

I give Ollie a conspiratorially wink. Focusing back on Ares, I ask, "Is

that what I did, shadow walked?”

“I’m guessing that’s what happened, that’s what it sounds like. What happened after?” Ares brushes his cheek against the top of my head.

Tangling my fingers in the fabric of his dark blue dress shirt, I try to explain how I felt. “I think I would have been okay if I hadn’t moved over to Ollie. But as soon as I got close to him, I felt horrible. Like I could barely stand up. I feel better now though.”

“It takes a lot of energy to shadow walk,” Ares informs me.

I nod. “Sorry if I took all yours when you got here. I didn’t mean to, it just happened.”

“Don’t be sorry, and I’m fine. I could feel you pulling from me, but it comes right back. Like a loop.”

“Are you sure?” I can’t help but feel guilty, it was like I didn’t even have a choice, my body just took what it needed from him.

“Promise, I’m good,” Ares murmurs, drawing me closer to his chest. I feel the heat of him seeping into my bones, leaving me feeling a little breathless and a lot turned on. If the hardness I feel under me is any indication, he’s feeling the same.

Dante shoulders his way into the room, his eyes scanning the gym. “We need to get our own place, I can’t keep running interference with Mom and the dads. Everything okay?”

“I think Laura just overexerted herself, she’s okay. And I’m working on it.” Ares pats my hip, telling me to stand. Releasing him, I get to my feet and Ares rises right behind me, keeping me in front of him as he turns us to face the others.

“Now we know she can use my ability even if she isn’t drawing it directly from me, but it takes a lot of energy. We’ll have to see if I’m with her, if it’ll have the same effects. Same for you.” Ares nods his head in Ollie’s direction. “But we will need to hold off on the training sessions for a day or two anyway.”

Ollie swallows. “Yeah, I think that would be good,” he agrees easily.

I look over my shoulder, but Ares won’t make eye contact with me. “Why, what’s up?” Milo leans his shoulder against the wall, his feet crossed at the ankle.

“I set up a meeting with the Whitmores,” Ares announces, and it drops like a lead weight. I pull away from him and study his face, but he’s still not looking at me. “I’ve been working on a cover story since we found out about

Leon.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” There’s an accusation in my tone.

Ares finally meets my eyes and his are filled with determination. I know there won’t be any stopping him. “I think it’s the best way to find out about Leon.” I look down at the ground, mad that he hasn’t been keeping me in the loop.

“What’s your in?” Milo moves over to a set of dumbbells lined up on a metal pyramid, and he picks up the fifty-pound weight and turns it over in his hand like he’s inspecting it, like it doesn’t weigh much at all.

“Security, I reached out to them and a few other Infinity groups living in their community to offer my services,” Ares explains. “I put out some feelers about relocating out that way and wanted to get a head start on some business relationships.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I cross my arms over my stomach. I haven’t felt like an outsider with them in a while, but Ares keeping this from me reminds me that I’m still a secret. That other than their families, no one knows about me.

“I didn’t want to say anything if it didn’t pan out. I got the call yesterday that Ms. Whitmore was willing to meet, and I wanted to set up a few other meetings so it wouldn’t seem suspicious.”

I glance at the others, none of them seem surprised about this development. Milo asked how he got in, but it almost seems like he knew he was trying, and he was only asking which avenue worked. “You guys knew.” It’s not a question.

“We knew he would try,” Dante confirms.

“This is such utter bullshit,” I grit out through my teeth. I spin on my heel, pissed off that they keep shit from me. Ollie calls my name before I’m even out the door. I ignore him and the ache in my heart that says how hurt I really am.

CHAPTER 3

*I*n my haste to get away from the guys, I left without any real plan of where I was going. Ares's bedroom is out, for obvious reasons. I really don't feel like running into Rosa, William, or Mal either.

I find a small room on the main floor that looks like a little sunporch. There are a few wicker rocking chairs on an old rag rug that look like they get little use. The walls are raw wood, cedar maybe, making it feel cozy. Two sides of the room are made up of mostly screen. The cool, evening autumn air blows in, bringing scents of burning fires and dry leaves. There isn't much else in the room, just a small matching table between the chairs, and nothing on the wall behind me. It feels a little barren, but I like it regardless.

Gingerly, I lower myself onto one of the chairs and I get a little creak of protest, but it feels sturdy enough, so I let my weight sink into the tufted cushion. Darkness falls early now, so I can't see much beyond the porch. I gaze out into the evening anyway, imagining a large backyard with a few trees dotted around to give plenty of shade on hot summer days.

Closing my eyes, I tip my head back to rest against the chair. I don't understand why Ares didn't tell me what he was planning. Why didn't any of them mention it to me? I bring my legs up into the chair, tucking them beneath me. I hate feeling like I'm being left in the dark. Finding out I've been uninformed my whole life makes me feel powerless. Like I have no control over what happens. I hate that they did the same thing to me.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I relax into the wicker rocking chair. It's true I'm aggravated that they kept this from me, but I'm also worried. What could Ares be getting himself into by going out there?

There's a part of me that knows Leon has something to do with my

mom's disappearance, and if that's true, then he probably already knows about me. Wouldn't he be suspicious if someone from the same area comes asking questions? Wouldn't it lead him right to us?

If I wouldn't have run off like a toddler with a temper tantrum, I could have posed those questions, but I let myself get too angry about not being included. Frustration with myself and the situation weighs on me. I can't keep running when things aren't going my way. But that's what we've always done.

Soft footsteps in the hall draw my attention, and I know it's not Dante or Ares. The bond would have told me they were close before I heard them. Ollie doesn't have the same stealthy mannerisms that come naturally to the brothers, so I don't think it's him either.

Rosa pokes her head into the room, her large eyes falling on me. "*Ciao* Laura, mind if I sit?" Her voice is light, and I think she would leave me without getting upset if I told her I wanted some time alone. But I don't really want her to go.

Rearranging myself in the chair so my feet hit the floor, I tell her, "Please, it's your house." I wave my hand at the empty chair beside me.

Rosa slips past the door, heading to the chair. She's wearing a dark, chunky sweater with light gray pants, and she looks comfortable, but stylish. Her dark hair is curled softly away from her face, showing off her beautiful features.

"How are you?" she asks, once she's folded herself into the chair with an elegance, I don't think I'll ever possess.

"I'm holding up." I don't want to lie to her and tell her everything is fine, but I also don't want to tell her how crazy I'm really feeling either.

"You don't give yourself enough credit darling. You're doing more than holding up." Rosa looks out into the backyard. Her words are delivered kindly, she's not putting me on the spot, and I don't feel like I need to defend how I'm feeling.

She seems content to just sit with me, providing company while I wrestle with what to do next. She doesn't push me to talk, or question why I'm out here instead of in the house with the guys. It's nice having her here with me. I can't pretend I know her that well yet, but I feel like I know her more than what I would have expected at this point.

Our situation lends itself to an intimacy I don't think you'd find in a normal relationship with your partner's parents. "I haven't bonded with Milo

or Ollie yet,” I blurt out, it’s not something I planned to say, more something that just pops out as my thoughts begin to unravel.

Rosa looks over at me, her eyes clear, but a little heavy like she was just as comfortable in the quiet as I’d assumed. “I know, no need to rush.”

“But... is that normal? The guys, they don’t... they’re not exactly... forthcoming with information all the time,” I stammer. I don’t want her to think I’m insulting them. But I have questions, and maybe she can answer some of them.

Rosa lets out a soft chuckle. “I don’t imagine they would say anything they think might upset you.” She reaches over and places her hand over mine for a brief moment, before pulling away. “Forgive them.” She sighs. “Men often make more of a mess of something that could have been easily solved if they would get out of their own way. So often they think they’re protecting us from things we don’t need protecting from.” I can almost hear Rosa’s eye roll.

Her words make a grin tug at the corner of my mouth. I can’t imagine Mal or William ever keeping anything from her. I’ve seen her when she gets riled up and I wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of her anger.

“There isn’t a standard here Laura,” Rosa tells me, meeting my eyes. “Everything about your Infinity is unique, as are you. There isn’t a rule book or an example you need to adhere to or follow, you do what’s best for you and the others. You’ll know when the time is right, as you did with Ares and Dante.”

I mull over her words and she waits patiently for me to continue. “Sometimes it doesn’t feel real,” I confess, looking out into the darkness.

“That I can understand, especially in your situation.” Rosa tucks a wave of hair over her shoulder as her eyes narrow, like she’s thinking back to the past. “When I was first introduced to William and Malcom, I couldn’t believe they were chosen for me. I was sure that any moment something would happen, and they would realize I wasn’t the one. It seemed almost too good to be true, and I grew up knowing one day I would find my pairs.” Rosa pauses letting her words sink in.

She’s telling me that my thoughts are normal, that we all experience the doubt and worry. Could it really be that simple, that everyone has these feelings? Like she knows what I’m thinking, Rosa states, “It gets easier.”

“When?” I can’t keep the question from leaving my lips.

Rosa’s lips thin and the corners of her eyes turn down like she might

frown, but she stops herself. “Once you’re bonded.” She shrugs her shoulders like she’s sorry that’s her answer, but gives me the truth anyway, even though she knows it’s not what I wanted to hear. I appreciate her honesty and a sense of calm falls over me.

Her answer might not be the definite time frame I wanted, because let’s be honest, if I could have the lingering doubts and worries go away right now, that would be the best option, but at least she’s giving me the truth. She’s not treating me with kid gloves, and I can respect that. I can deal with that. “Thank you,” I respond, and I hope she knows that I’m thanking her for more than just talking to me, I hope she knows how grateful I am that she understood I could handle the truth, even if it’s not ideal.

An easy twenty minutes pass without either of us interrupting the quiet that has settled over us. Me clearing my throat is the first sign I will change that. “I think I’m going to go have a talk with the guys. Ares told me he was heading out to meet with Leon’s family, and I have some questions.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Rosa replies. “I think I’ll sit a while longer. I forgot how lovely the evenings are here.” Her eyes meet mine and something passes between us, an understanding, an acceptance? Maybe even a little gratitude from both of us.

“Thank you, Rosa,” I utter quietly.

She smiles at me, the corner of her eyes crinkling up with the quirk of her lips. “Anytime.”

CHAPTER 4

It's easy to find the guys, they're all in Ares's room. Their conversation dries up the moment I open the door. Dante's head is already turned in my direction, while Ollie adjusts his body so he can see me from his spot on the floor.

I close the door behind me with a quiet snap. Ares comes out of the bathroom, one towel around his waist and rubbing another one over his hair as he watches me. It becomes clear they're all waiting for me.

I'm ready to a really talk about what Ares is planning, and about me not wanting to be left out, even if they think they're protecting me. I want to put our cards on the table. I've accepted that I need to bond with Ollie and Milo too, when they're ready of course. It's not a question about Ollie, I think he wants it, has wanted it, but something tells me Milo is still holding himself back.

Bracing my hands behind me, I lean against the door. Ares's eyes flow over me, he doesn't hide the way he looks at me, never has. I glance over at Dante and Milo next to him, leaning against the wall behind the bed. Dante looks unruffled, his shoulders are back, and his face is turned toward me with an openness that I don't see in Milo. He looks much more guarded—is that a side effect of us not having bonded yet?

Ollie props his head up on his hand where he's lounging on the floor near the foot of the bed. Again, I'm struck how they're all waiting for me.

The TV isn't on and the silence hangs between us, eating away a little of my conviction. Ares rubs the towel over his hair and shakes his head once he pulls it away. His movements spur me into speaking. I have all of their attention, and that's exactly what I want. I need them to understand,

hopefully for the last time, that I need to know what's happening in my life.

"Sorry I ran off, I needed a little while to think."

"It's okay," Milo rushes out, like he's been waiting to say something. I take in his big body, the way he's holding himself so still against the wall. His shoulders are rigid, his hands clasped tightly over his knees. From the distance between us I can't make out the blue of his eyes, but I can see the furrow of his brow, the way his chest is moving up and down a little too fast for someone just sitting there.

"Well, I shouldn't have stormed off, we need to talk." I look away from Milo. I want all of them to hear me.

Ares tosses the towel he was using near the bathroom door and it lands with a damp plop on the floor. It's a sign he isn't exactly himself either. He always puts his stuff where it belongs, whether it's in the hamper or hung back up, he hates messes.

Dante tips his head back and I see his nostrils flare like he's taking a deep breath. Scenting me. His head lowers, and he continues to stare at me from under his brows.

With my hands still locked behind me, I shift my weight from one foot to the other. "I don't like the fact that you kept this from me." When Ares opens his mouth, I hold up my hand to stop him. "I know what you're going to say, it doesn't even matter. I know why you did it. You think you're protecting me."

Ollie sits up so he no longer lying down. Using the bed, he heaves himself up and takes a seat on the edge. Ares winces, and his hands move to his exposed hips as his head hangs. "Would it help if I said I was sorry, and it wasn't intentional? I didn't plan not to tell you." Ares lifts his head, so he's looking at me. "I was just thinking about getting answers. I thought if I told you once I knew something for sure, then I was just saving you from worrying about it." He raises his hand much like I did moments ago, stopping me from saying anything.

"I see that was a bad choice, I'll even admit that you're probably right. I was trying to protect you, but it wasn't something I did on purpose. I did it without even realizing why I was doing it."

Surprised by his admittance and his apology, I take my hands from behind my back and stand with my spine straight. That was way easier than I was expecting, but I'm not done yet. "You guys can't do that though." I make sure to look each of them in the eye while saying it. I want them to know that

I don't blame them all for not telling me, but I think they each played a part. "I need to know what's going on."

I don't feel like I need to rehash my explanations, I've already told them I'm tired of not knowing what is going on in my own life. I'm willing to let this go because we're all new to this. I know I've made mistakes, and will probably continue to make mistakes.

"We'll do better," Dante rumbles. He looks at his brother first, then at Milo and Ollie.

I let out a deep breath. "Okay, okay. So, let's talk about what you're planning." I focus my attention on Ares but look away quickly. His state of undress is too distracting. "Can you put something on?" I whisper almost to myself, but he hears me.

Heading straight in my direction he gets uncomfortably close, his warm skin millimeters from mine as he leans down and places a chaste kiss to my temple. He's gone a second later, heading to the closet off to my right.

I pretend his nearness doesn't affect me as I make my way over to the bed to sit down. Ollie immediately scoots closer. His hand finds mine, and he intertwines our fingers, placing them in his lap. I give him a grateful squeeze and wait for Ares to come back from the closet.

I don't have to wait long, but unfortunately, he's still distracting. He replaced the towel with a low-slung pair of light gray sweatpants. His feet are bare, as is his chest. I can see his mark peeking up just above the waistband of his pants. Distracting indeed.

Oblivious to my gawking, Ares stands a few feet in front of me with his hands hung loosely at his sides. His head is tipped back just enough that it makes the thickness of his neck more appealing. I look down and swallow. Jesus, how can I be thinking about how gorgeous he looks right now?

"Several people were asking why I came home, I've been gone for almost two years, so a few people speculated that something changed. I haven't really responded one way or another, but after we found out about Leon, I used the rumors to my advantage."

Dante shifts behind me, and I turn to watch as he slinks closer to me, his eyes never leaving mine as he closes the distance between us. My mouth falls open when he slides right behind me, his legs going on either side of mine as he pulls me back against him. I glance over at Ollie who is still holding my hand, but he adjusts himself so Dante can wrap his body around mine without complaint.

Ares continues, his face completely calm. “I put out the word I was looking to relocate, expand out west. Their community was a logical choice, already heavily entrenched with Infinities and their children.”

“What exactly is it you do?” I interrupt him.

“He’s a fixer, a problem solver,” Milo answers for Ares. I look over at him and his eyes meet mine. For a single second I think I see something in his face, jealousy, wistfulness, something, but then it’s gone before I can even decipher it.

“Which means what?”

“I have a security company. But in our society, I’m who they call if something happens that can’t be easily explained. I fix problems,” Ares explains without an ounce of smugness. He states it like it’s a fact that can’t be denied.

I pinch my forehead. “What kind of problems?”

Ares shrugs one wide shoulder. “Anything from some newly transitioned kid starting a fire at school, to a politician who needs to hide that his wife has another husband.”

My back goes straight. “What if you get caught, what if the government or the police find out about you?” I can’t keep the fear from my voice.

Ollie lets out a low chuckle. “What do you think they could do to him? They wouldn’t even be able to hold him.”

“This isn’t funny Oliver.” I pull my hand from his and push him to the side.

“If you understood how powerful he is, you’d know he’s not at risk,” Milo says. I hold my tongue. I want to tell them you should never tempt fate, that you should always assume there is always someone bigger, badder, and tougher than you, but I don’t. I probably just feel that way because my mother drilled those thoughts into my head.

I shake my head, pushing away the thoughts. “How is this still a secret? I mean your abilities, how have you’ve been able to keep the existence of the Infinity a secret?” I’ve often wondered this, but never really gotten around to asking the question.

Ares moves over toward the bed and takes a seat, his shoulders bunch as he props a pillow against the wall and sits. “We do less hiding than you’d think. If you’re reclusive, or super private, people will assume you have something to hide. So, we live our lives. You’d be surprised how many people have seen something they can’t explain, but instead of questioning it,

they rationalize it. Their brain tells them they didn't see a guy disappear into the shadows, that they just couldn't see him walk away." Ares settles on the bed, his back leaning against the pillow.

I guess I can understand that, but it seems like someone somewhere would have seen something that isn't as easy to dismiss. I've gone off track again.

"When are you going?" I bite the corner of my lip. I don't want Ares to go. I hate when I have to go all morning and afternoon without seeing him. What will it be like if he leaves for a few days? "How long are you going to be gone?" The second question comes before he has a chance to answer the first.

Ares lifts his arms and folds them behind his head, his gaze slides over to Dante. "We're leaving tomorrow morning, pretty early. And I don't know how long we'll be gone."

"Wait." I pull away from Dante so I can see him behind me, and I look back and forth between the two brothers. "You're both going?"

Dante's hand smooths over my thigh. "He really shouldn't go alone."

I look down, feeling slightly guilty that I'd assumed he was. Dante's right though, Ares shouldn't go alone. As I process their plan, I actually feel better knowing they will be together. But selfishly, I don't want either of them to leave me.

"You guys are staying though, right?" I switch my gaze to Milo and Ollie.

Milo nods his head as Ollie answers, "We wouldn't be able to go anyway, we're not bonded to you yet. We wouldn't be able to handle the separation."

My face flushes. That's something else I wanted to talk to them about. Patting Dante's leg, I turn in his embrace so I can see Milo and Ollie better on the other side of the bed. "Should we do that now, bond I mean?"

Milo's head jerks up like I've surprised him, and Ollie looks almost eager at the idea. "Are you sure you're ready for that?" It's Milo who speaks up. "You don't really have a good grasp of your abilities yet..." He lets the sentence trail off like there's more he's not saying.

The sting of rejection hits hard and fast, and I hope my face doesn't betray my emotions. "That makes sense," I croak out, and before Milo can say anything, I turn away from him.

After a brief moment of silence, Ares tells me, "Our flight is at nine, that way we'll be there before lunch. I don't want to be gone any longer than I

need to be.”

“What about school?”

I feel Dante shrug behind me. “It won’t be a big deal. I can always get an excuse if we’re gone more than a day or two, and we have Thanksgiving break coming up.”

“Is that all you think it’ll take, a day or two?” My voice is small, but hopeful. No one answers me, so I’m not very confident they’ll be back that soon.

“I’m going to shower,” Ollie grumbles. He shoves off the bed in a way that makes me think he’s mad about something. I peer over at Milo but his head is down, and I can’t see his face at all.

I snag Ollie’s hand as he passes, and he pauses and looks down at me. The line of his jaw softens, and he gives me a slow, reluctant smile. He gives my fingers a little jiggle then releases my hand, heading to the bathroom.

I’m not sure what to make of his behavior, but Milo clears his throat the moment the door closes behind Ollie. “I forgot I needed to tell him something.” Milo’s off the bed and rushing to the door before anyone of us can object. It seemed like Ollie wanted a few minutes to himself, but who am I to interfere? They’ve been friends for years.

“That might not go the way he’s expecting,” Ares mutters under his breath.

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s just say Oliver didn’t like Milo’s response to your offer of bonding,” Ares answers. Reaching out one hand, he beckons me forward. “Let them work it out.”

Climbing over Dante’s thigh, I crawl up the bed to lie next to Ares. Dante is close behind and he curls his body around mine, becoming the big spoon as I settle my head on Ares’s torso, whose hand delves into my hair, massaging my scalp.

Ares stays in a lounged seated position, so as I relax my head falls closer to his lap. Dragging in a deep settling breath I tell them both, “I already miss you guys and you haven’t even left yet.” The confession comes easily. I don’t have to worry they’ll think I’m being silly or dramatic. I know they’ll accept my feelings and probably feel similarly.

Dante tucks himself even closer to me, burrowing his face at the nape of my neck. His palm splayed wide, covering as much of my stomach as possible.

“We’ll do what me must, then come home to you, *Cara*.” Ares’ fingers start pulling through my hair. A feeling of contentment settles over me. I know they won’t be away any longer than absolutely necessary. I let my eyes drift closed with that thought in mind.

Seconds later a crash from the bathroom jolts me from my relaxed state. I lift my head from Ares and look at the door, but Dante rasps, “It’s fine, don’t worry.” I strain to hear any more noises, but it’s quiet.

“I thought Ollie was going to take a shower, why is Milo still in there?”

“Milo has something he still needs to work through, so he and Ollie are talking.” Dante runs his hand from my stomach, up over my hip, and back. He’s trying to distract me, and damn it. It’s working. I let my head fall back against Ares as Dante’s hand continues to roam from just under my breasts, down past my belly button, and over my side and hip.

Every time his fingers get close to the apex of my thighs or the underside of my breasts, I hold my breath, thinking this time he’s going to go just a little bit further. The cycle continues until I can’t focus on anything other than his hand. I make a fist, gathering some of the loose fabric of Ares’s sweatpants in my hand. I hadn’t realized it before, but my hand is high on his upper thigh, nearly as close to his center as Dante’s fingers are coming to mine.

Ares’s abdominals go rigid and I lift my head, looking up. I don’t know what he sees on my face, but he scoots down hastily and seals his mouth to mine.

I have a second of hesitation. Dante is right behind me, and I know he’s not sleeping. His hand has stopped moving, but he’s gripping the crest of my hip with rough fingers. Dante’s forehead slides down, touching just below my neck. He doesn’t pull away or say anything. His breathing is a little ragged, but that could just be my own.

Ares coaxes the kiss out of me. He runs his tongue over my bottom lip seductively, and pants a heavy minty breath into my mouth. I’m helpless to resist him, I never wanted to anyway. As soon as he knows he has me, he deepens the kiss. His tongue lapping into my mouth with long, steady strokes, brushing against mine.

The heat of Dante behind me sears into me. I can’t deny the excitement I feel being between them. Dante’s hand jerks my hips back and he grinds into me. He lets out a low rumbling sound that sounds like a warning.

Ares slows his kiss, and he nips my lips a few times in a warning all his

own. I'm breathless when he finally pulls away. I almost tuck my face into his chest so he won't see the effects his kiss and Dante's nearness had on me, but I don't. I open my eyes to find Ares staring at me with a look of hunger on his face that probably puts the lust on mine to shame.

Reaching forward, he cradles my jaw in his hand. "I'll be back soon." He drops a not so gentle kiss to my mouth unapologetically and pulls back. The promise in his voice is certain, so is the hint of what's coming.

Dante doesn't speak as Ares rolls onto his back. I curl into him with Dante still tightly wrapped around me. My heart is thrumming a steady beat in my chest. I slide my hand over Ares's stomach and place my palm over his heart, feeling the rapid beat of his pulse under my hand. I'm definitely not the only one affected.

Ares flips the switch on the lamp next to his bed, plunging the room into darkness. I hadn't planned on going to bed so early, but I'm warm and comfortable, and my eyes drift shut as I nestle my cheek against Ares. I hate knowing he and Dante won't be here with me tomorrow night. It'll be the first time I haven't slept next to Ares in weeks.

Sometime later, as I'm drifting in that in-between place of sleep and consciousness, the bathroom door opens. Milo comes out, and I see him briefly before the light coming from the bathroom is extinguished by the closing door. Adjusting my eyes to the darkness, I watch as he makes his way over to the far side of the bed, he drops down heavily and his head falls into his hands.

There's an air of exhaustion hanging over his slumped shoulders. I think about pulling out from between Dante and Ares, but the sting of his bond refusal is too recent. I don't know how to get closer to him. It feels like every time I think we might be breaking down the wall he's built between us, something happens that has him pulling further away from me.

With a heavy sigh, Milo lifts his head and looks over his shoulder, and I slit my eyes, hoping he doesn't catch me watching him. More carefully than I'd think possible, Milo picks up the pillow at the top of the bed and re-settles it near the edge. Without even removing his shirt, he lays on his back, his arms folded over his chest, hands tucked away. His eyes are wide, staring at the ceiling. Minutes pass and he doesn't move a muscle, never once pulling the covers up as he lies there separated from me by a few feet, but he feels like he's miles away.

The door to the bathroom opens again, and that's when Milo closes his

eyes, his breathing shallowing out. He's pretending to be asleep now too. I watch Ollie as he nears the end of the bed; he doesn't need the light to know Milo left an empty space between himself and Dante.

Ollie climbs into bed from the bottom, making sure not to disturb his friend as he does. Once settled, he pulls the covers over himself and Milo before turning onto his side and facing Dante.

I need to have a talk with Ollie. With Ares and Dante leaving tomorrow morning, I'll have plenty of time to get to the bottom of what's going on between him and Milo.

CHAPTER 5

“We really need to go.” I’ve heard Dante and Ares mutter these words more times than I can count this morning. This time it happens to be Dante, mumbling against my lips between light kisses.

“I know,” I tell him, but I don’t pull away.

Dante takes a hold of my shoulders and takes a step back from me. I look up at him through my lashes, I can’t stop the pout from forming on my lips. I don’t want him to go. I don’t want either of them to go. “Don’t look at me like that Laura,” Dante chides, and he sounds almost as pained as I am at the thought of not seeing him for days.

I clench my jaw and pull my lips out of the sullen pout. I force my mouth into a smile, but we both know it’s fake. “We’ll be in touch, okay?” Dante bends his knees so he’s eye level with me. He searches back and forth between my eyes, looking for something. I nod and blink several times so the pricking behind my eyes doesn’t turn into tears.

Satisfied with what he sees, Dante looks over my shoulder. I know Milo and Ollie are back there. They’re giving us space to say goodbye, but Dante jerks his head back, his chin going into the air. Refocusing on me, he says, “Anything happens, Ares will be right back.” Dante straightens, his hands smoothing down my arms to catch my fingers.

“I can’t shadow walk with him, but I’ll be right behind him if you need me.” Again, I nod, unwilling to open my mouth. I’m afraid I’ll beg him to stay if I do. Ares already told me this morning that he can be back here quickly if he needs to be, so I already know what Dante is telling me.

I feel a hand on my shoulder, and I look over and see Ollie. He isn’t

smiling, which makes my sadness even more real for some reason. “Be safe, keep us updated,” he tells Dante in an uncharacteristically serious voice. Dante releases my hands and I fall, more than lean, into Ollie. He takes me without complaint and holds me up as Dante gives me one last, soft peck on my lips. I lean up on my toes to press my mouth to his, but he pulls away too fast, turning away and jogging over to the car where Ares is already waiting.

Meeting his eyes in the driver’s seat, Ares gives me a wink. I let out a small a chuckle. Milo steps up next to me, and he raises one hand in a wave while shielding his eyes with the other. I wrap my arm around Ollie’s waist, pulling myself even closer to him as Ares makes a turn and the car drives down the lane, leading to the main road.

Briefly, I think back to my stolen moments with Ares in the kitchen this morning. He surprised me by being the first one to wake up this morning. In turn, he woke me with a light caress over my cheek. As soon as I opened my eyes, he held one arm out to me and put a finger against his lips to let me know to stay quiet. I crawled from the bed and into his waiting arms, with Dante and the others still sleeping soundly in bed.

Already showered and dressed, Ares carried me from the room with ease. I dropped my head to his chest and inhaled his fresh scent into my lungs as I relaxed against him. He made a stop at one of the many bathrooms where I was able to handle my morning business and rinse my mouth out a few times, sans toothbrush.

Hand in hand, he guided me to the kitchen where he searched through a few cupboards and handed me a protein bar and a banana with a sheepish grin on his face. “Sorry about breakfast, or lack thereof.”

Reaching forward, I pulled him to me over the counter by the sleeve of his black button-down shirt. “Thank you, but I’d rather have coffee.” I planted a sweet kiss on the corner of his lips and released him, falling back into my chair.

“That, I can manage,” he purred, before leaning forward and sealing his lips to mine. His palm landed on the back of my neck, holding me to him. Grateful that I took the time to rinse my mouth, I returned his kiss with just as much passion. If that stupid counter wasn’t between us, I’d have been in his arms.

He pulled away first, and I placed my fingers over my swollen lips, still feeling the slight sting from the light nips he gave them. Ares’s eyes are full black, the whites having been completely swallowed by the darkness. He

smoothed his hand down his fitted charcoal gray vest, his hand going south of his waist and disappearing under the counter. My eyes tracked the movement, and I leaned forward, intending to see exactly where that hand went, but noise in the distance had my eyes jumping to meet his.

Ares's breaths were still heavy when he turned to face the coffee maker. Dropping his head as he grasped the counter, he took in several deep inhales, and I watched as his back rose and fell. Settling myself on the stool, I crossed my legs and brushed away imaginary lint from my leggings. I really wished I could get this attraction thing under control.

Dante shuffled into the kitchen and he bumped his head against mine before dropping into the seat beside me. "You should have woken me up." His voice was gravely and deep.

With my elbow on the countertop, I dropped my head to my palm, and a sigh left me before I could rein it in. Dante's voice did magical things to my insides.

Ollie's voice cuts into my musings, snapping me back to the present. "Well, we only have a few hours before work, what kind of trouble can we find before then?" Ollie announces before the taillights disappear. I glance over at Milo, he's still staring out into the distance. I think it's more in avoidance than anything else.

"What would you like to do Milo?"

"Me?" His eyes meet mine for a split second. "Uh... I have—"

"Nothing." Ollie interrupts firmly. "You have nothing to do but hang out with us for a little while." There's no lightness in his tone. His eyes are narrowed on his best friend as I look between the two of them.

Milo breaks the eye contact first, shoving his hands into the pockets of his gray joggers. "Sure, that works." He doesn't even answer my question, just ignores it altogether.

"Food first. I'm starving."

"When aren't you?" I force lightness into my tone as I reply to Ollie.

"Growing boy," he adds without missing a beat. "Then we'll see what trouble finds us." With a mischievous little grin, he slings his arm over my shoulder and mine wraps around his waist, and then we begin walking. Ollie takes a large step with his right leg overlapping my left. Keeping up the game I do the same to him, so we walk in tandem to the side door off the kitchen. I know Milo is following behind us, but he doesn't try to include himself in our game. This is going to be a long few days if I can't figure out what's going

on with him.

We eat a proper breakfast of eggs and toast. Milo perks up a bit, even joining in to help butter the bread as we prepare the food.

Rosa and the guys have been conveniently absent all morning, giving us privacy.



Instead of seeking out the trouble Ollie alluded to, we head back to Ares's room when we're done. Being in here when I know he won't be coming through the door and shaking his head at the mess Ollie made of the bed, or the game controllers lying on the floor where Milo left them, makes my heart ache a little. Instead of dwelling on those thoughts, I pull his pillow into my lap and bring it up to my nose when I know the guys are deep into their game.

His scent still lingers enough so I catch a whiff of him as I squeeze it tight. Dropping it, I finger the thick leather strap on my wrist, which Dante fastened there after removing it from his own. They aren't close, but I still feel their nearness anyway.

Finally deciding the pity party is too much, I fling the pillow off my lap and scoot to the end of the bed to sit with the guys.

Milo's dark blue eyes meet mine. "Want to play?" he asks tentatively.

I scrunch up my nose and pucker my lips. "Not really. Thanks though." I place my hand purposefully on his shoulder and balance myself, pulling my legs out from under me so they dangle off the end of the bed. Milo stiffens but doesn't shake off my touch. I long for the closeness I feel with the others as I let my hand trail over his shoulder and down his forearm.

Milo licks his bottom lip while staring at the game on the TV with his eyes larger than normal. I don't know how to take his response. It wasn't long ago that he was asking me to include him, to consider him, but that feels like eons ago. I feel like I'm back to square one with him, questioning if he even wants to be in this Infinity with me.

"Milo."

He blinks several times, not looking at me. "Yeah?"

I place my hand over his on the game controller. He swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing. I lose my nerve to ask him what's wrong, to ask him if this is still something he wants. It feels so selfish of me to demand to know why he's acting so distant. Pulling my hand back to my lap, I mutter, "Never mind."

I see him peek at me from the corner of his eye but ignore it. That's what he wants anyway, right?

"Oh, shit," Ollie pipes up, tossing his remote carelessly to the floor.

"What's wrong?" Milo and I both ask, alarm in our voices as Ollie stands.

"I totally forgot Ares asked me to take care of something. I'll be back before you need to leave for work," Ollie explains, quickly sliding on a pair of mismatched socks.

"But that's not for hours, and what did he ask you to do?" I glance at the clock. It's not even nine yet. I realize the guys' flight hasn't even taken off. Shaking those thoughts away I focus back on Ollie.

His face is tinted red and he won't look at me. "It's not a big deal, just something I forgot. You guys wait here, I'll be back before eleven thirty."

I open my mouth to protest, to ask more questions, but he's out the door before another word leaves my lips. I look over at Milo, my eyes wide. "Do you think something's wrong?" A knot of worry tightens my belly.

Milo's nostrils flare as his lips go thin and flat. "No, he's lying his ass off." There's actually some heat to Milo's words.

Confused, for more than one reason, I ask, "Why?"

"He's a meddling, know it all bastard." I jerk back, surprised by the vehemence of his words. I don't think I've ever heard Milo mad at Ollie.

Milo's shoulders fall and his head angles to the side. With a little more care, he tosses his remote to the bed. I shift, uncomfortable now that Ollie is gone. He's always the best buffer. Balling my hands into fists I push them over my thighs. Awkward silence fills the surrounding space.

Milo tilts his head back to look up at the ceiling. His eyes close and I see his lips move silently. Is it really that hard for him to be alone with me for a little while?

Rising to my feet I back away a few steps. "Uh... I'll just go hang out in the living room. Give you some space."

"Wait," Milo calls out, with urgency in his voice.

I shift from foot to foot then turn to face him, my arms going over my stomach. "I ah..." Milo pushes both arms straight, gripping the end of the bed

so his shoulders bunch up near his ears. “Can you stay?” So much uncertainty comes out in his words.

“You want me to?” I peer sideways at him, just as uncertain.

“I do.” He releases the bed, his movement jerky.

“Okay...” I fiddle with the long sleeves of my thermal shirt as I drop my arms to my sides, letting the fabric pull over my hands.

“Fuck,” Milo breathes. I don’t think I’m supposed to hear him, but I do. “Ollie thinks we need to talk,” he adds, hunching his back as he leans his forearms on his thighs. “That’s why he disappeared. He thinks he’s helping.” Milo winces at his own sarcasm.

“But you don’t want to talk...?” I don’t add *to me*, but I’m thinking it. Milo’s eyes are cast down at the ground. He shrugs noncommittally.

“We can, I guess.” He sounds a little sullen.

“We don’t have to, not if you don’t want to Milo.” He looks up at me when I say his name.

“We should though.”

The somberness of his tones makes me think I really don’t want to have this conversation. “Was there something particular that Ollie thought we should talk about?” I inquire tentatively.

Milo stand up, his large frame filling up more space than you’d think possible. He begins a slow pace on the opposite side of the room. He only has a few feet to work with before he’ll hit the wall or come too close in my direction. He takes maybe three strides before turning back and following the same path.

“Us, this.” Milo halts, he waves his hand between us.

“What about us?” I cock my hip out to the side feeling very defensive, and I don’t even know why. Milo looks at me with his head cocked to the side, and his eyes widened in a *you can’t be serious* way. I wait him out, tilting my head in a similar fashion.

He scoffs and resumes pacing. After only a few steps he stops again, and turning on me he says, “Why don’t you treat me like you do the others?”

Taken aback by his question I furrow my brow, shaking my head in denial. “What do you mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean.” Milo stands to his full height, looking down at me from across the room with his bulky arms folded over his chest. The sight of him standing against me gives me a sour taste in the back of my throat. He thinks I treat him differently? If I do, it’s only out of respect for his

wishes. I don't want to force a relationship with him.

When I don't immediately answer, he accuses, "See, you can't even deny it."

"You're not giving me anything to deny Milo." My voice is rising to meet his.

"I feel like I'm always playing catch up. You had a connection to Ares the moment you saw him, it was obvious to all of us." I don't bother trying to deny his words. They're the absolute truth, from the first moment I met Ares there was something there.

But I felt exactly the same when I met him, and the others. I was just too afraid to admit it, even to myself. Milo continues, "I wanted to give you the time Dante thought you needed. Let you gets to know us, but the only thing that did was push you closer to them."

"Milo, I've already told you I wanted that with you. That I wanted to get to know you better." My voice is calm, even, compared to his. All I want is for him to let me in, but he's the one always pushing me away.

"That's what you say, but that's not what you do. You practically run into Dante's arms when you see him. And forget about Ollie and Ares." Milo says their names with an eye roll.

Suddenly feeling very defensive again, I counter, "I try to get close to you, talk to you, but you're always putting someone between us. Ollie asks to take me to work alone so we have a few minutes together, Ares never hides his affection for me. You don't do that."

"I don't want to push you!" Milo's eyes go round, and his chin juts forward. He's yelling at me.

I narrow my eyes at him. "You're standing here furious with me because what, I kiss Ares more than you? News flash Milo, he and the others have made it clear they want that." I raise my brow at him. I'm not at his level of yelling, but I'm not backing down either.

"But I'm not included?"

"How am I supposed to know you'd want that from me?" I throw my hands up in the air,

they fall back to the side of my thighs with a slap.

"How could you not know I'd want that?" Milo looks down at the ground, his voice much lower, almost like he's talking to himself.

"I don't know what you want Milo, because you've never told me, never showed me. Ares is so open about his affection. He makes me feel like

I could walk up to him at any time and kiss him and he would accept it. Hell, want it.” I grab my right wrist with my left, holding my arms in front of my body.

“You don’t make me feel like that. There’s a small piece of me that thinks if I were to ever go to you, especially if someone was around, you would push me away, reject me.” Releasing my hands, I rub them over my face. “So I don’t open myself up to you like that, because I’m afraid you don’t really want me to.” The confession comes from me with a hint of exhaustion. I walk over to the bed, the only real place to sit, and drop onto the low mattress.

Milo stands in place, not moving and barely breathing, as he stares out into space. After a few moments of his stunned silence he moves. It begins with a slight shaking of his head in denial. His eyes settle on mine, and the tight line of his jaw and the way his lips are pulled into a flat line, make me think he wants to refuse my claim. He surprises me by saying, “I don’t want you to feel that way. I want you to know you can come to me, just like you can go to the others.” Milo rolls his neck back and forth a few times, and his body relaxes as he does.

It seems he used the time he spent thinking about what I said to calm himself, since he’s no longer yelling, and doesn’t seem nearly as agitated. After the quick stretches he comes and sits next to me on the bed, leaving enough space between us where we could reach out and still not touch.

“You kinda have a funny way of showing it,” I comment with a little chuckle, hoping to further alleviate the tension in the room. My words fall a little flat as he continues to stare at me.

“Do you really think that I would push you away?” He sounds vulnerable, almost like he doesn’t want to hear my answer, but asked the question anyway.

I shrug, looking down at my fingernails. “I don’t know Milo, kinda. You’re always so distant. You never ask to sleep next to me.” My cheeks flush, but I continue anyway. “Never ask or try to spend any time alone with me. Most of the time I feel like you’re being forced into an arrangement you don’t want to be in, but don’t really have a choice in, either.” I look up, watching him to see his reaction. Will he be mad?

Anger is the last thing I’d guess he’s feeling, because Milo looks almost wounded by my words. His lips are turned down in a frown, and the corners of his eyes have even fallen. “Laura...” He shakes his head again, this time in

disbelief. “I really was trying to give you space and time to adjust. Ares never even really gave you a choice to accept him or not, and I get it. He’d given up hope he would ever have a synergist, so I don’t blame him for it or anything,” Milo rushes, defending his words like I might take offense. “And Ollie,” Milo actually rolls his eyes, “don’t even get me started on him. He was almost as bad as Ares, but sneakier about it.” I can hear the affection he has in his voice, for his friend? I still feel like there’s more to their relationship. Milo turns, angling his knee on the bed so he’s facing me more.

“I know it might seem strange, but the way Ares just pushed right past any boundaries I might have set up was kinda comforting. It was like from the beginning I knew he would always be there, like we were already an inevitable conclusion.” I bite my lip, it’s weird voicing my thoughts out loud. I’ve never really had to analyze these things.

“Maybe that’s where I made the mistake then? I didn’t give you the reassurance that I wasn’t going anywhere either.”

Leaning over enough so I can wrap my fingers over Milo’s arm, I tell him, “It wasn’t a mistake Milo. You didn’t do anything wrong.” I pull back and place my hand behind me on the bed. “I think I was trying to do the same for you. I didn’t want to be the one to force you into being with me. This thing, this relationship, is far from what I ever imagined for myself.” I look at the wall since I can’t look at him while I’m talking about this, but we need to talk about it.

“I never even really had friends Milo, and then these three beautiful boys came along and told me I’m who they’ve been waiting for—me. It was almost more than I could ever even hope for, and then I find out there’s another one of you.” I shake my head thinking back to how confused I felt in the beginning.

“I hadn’t ever really imagined what life would be like for me once I finished school. I figured I’d keep working, keep taking care of my mom, and maybe, maybe at some point, I’d find someone. But I’d never really given it more than a fleeting thought. I’ve never even had a crush on a boy.”

I look over at him; he’s been quiet while I’ve been talking. I know he’s listening since his eyes are locked on me. “Then you guys came along, and I could barely think straight when you were in the same room with me. Being with you guys was more than I ever dreamed of, but being with all of you...” I pause, trying to come up with the words that can actually convey how I’m feeling.

“In here, it feels so right.” I cross my arm over my chest and gather the material over my heart. “But up here,” I use my other hand to point up at my head, “it feels like I’m taking advantage of you guys. My brain tells me it’s not fair, that there’s nothing I’ve ever done to deserve all of you, while the only thing you get in return is me.”

Milo closes the distance between us in an instant. It happens so fast, my elbow bumps into his chest. Using his right arm, he pulls me into him, my head nestling under his chin. I feel his chest expand as Milo takes a deep breath. “I will have to politely disagree with your head on this one, sweetheart.” I feel his morning stubble pull through my hair as he turns his head.

“None of us would change it, I want you to know that, even if there was some way to do it. Not one of us would. There could never be a better match for us, and I’m lucky to be part of your Infinity,” Milo tells me, his voice soft, calm. I wrap my arm around his back and accept the nearness he’s offering. Holding onto Milo is different than the others. He’s bulkier than even Ares, not quite as tall but bigger, sturdier. There’s no softness to him as I lean my head against his chest.

Milo clears his throat and pulls back from me, so I tilt my head to look up at his angled jaw. “I uh... I, you’re right about me keeping my distance too. And it wasn’t just because I wanted to give you time to adjust,” he admits reluctantly.

I scrunch my brows together. “Oh?” I don’t really know what else to say. I sit up a little more and my hand trails over the curve of his back as I do.

“I don’t have a lot of experience with,” Milo pauses, seeming to think of what to say next, “relationships either.” He doesn’t meet my eyes.

“So, you didn’t date much?” I can’t filter out the hopeful note in my voice.

Milo runs a hand over his hair. This close to him I can see all the blond highlights that run through his ashy brown locks.

“Well, I’m best friends with Ollie and Dante so...” The sentence hangs, but I think I know what he’s getting at.

“So, you have dated a lot?”

“Dated, I guess you could say I dated, or hung out with a few people. But I’ve never. I haven’t. You know... because my ability. I was afraid I would hurt someone. Lose control and hurt someone.” Milo’s face flashes bright red, and heat rushes to mine.

“I see,” I say awkwardly and wince. How do I respond to that? He’s telling me he’s a virgin.

Milo rocks his head on his neck again. “I mean, I’m telling you because I’ve been afraid of being alone with you.” He sounds defensive, but I think he’s more embarrassed than anything. His shoulders go up as his chin drops closer to his chest.

Reaching over to grab one of his hands, I lace my fingers with his. “Just so you know, me neither, not because I was worried about abilities or anything. I never wanted to before.” I bump my shoulder against Milo’s. I’ve never asked the others, I’d actually assumed all of them had... done stuff before. Knowing Milo hasn’t causes a gleeful smile to quirk my lips, and I don’t even try to hide it.

CHAPTER 6

“*B*oth of you guys are staying?” I look between Milo and Ollie. “Nothing better to do,” Ollie offers, snagging my hand as he tows me through the door to the diner. I glance at Milo over my shoulder, making sure he’s following. After our talk this morning I feel a new closeness to him that I can’t deny I was missing. He’s right behind us, only a step or two away.

I walk forward so Ollie isn’t dragging me so much anymore. The first door opens, and he ushers me through. I grab the handle of the second, but Milo’s hand covers mine. I look up to find him right beside me, his eyes gentle as he watches me.

“Thank you,” I mutter to the both of them, a little flustered under Milo’s new attentiveness. Ollie chuckles like he knows exactly what I’m thinking.

“Laura, I am so glad to see you,” Maggie calls out in greeting before turning to the guys. “Milo where have you been boy? It’s been ages!”

“Not really Gran, just under a week,” he counters, but wraps his arms around the robust woman anyway.

“Oliver, I haven’t seen you all week either.” Maggie’s eyebrows raise.

“We’ve been eating at home more,” Ollie admits, clapping and rubbing his hands together, while sucking air through his teeth. “But I’m ready for some of Gus’s famous greasy diner gourmet, what ya got for me?”

Maggie tsks, but she can’t hide the tilt of her lips. “You want food, you had better get to work first. I ain’t feeding you for free boy.” She looks down the edge of her nose at him, even though he’s taller than her. “You eat nearly as much as Dante.” Her words could be insulting, but we all know they’re not.

Ollie smooths his hand over his flat abdomen and gives her an unrepentant grin. “Put me to work, cause I came prepared to eat.”



The day passes by quickly, and before I know it, it's early evening. The diner crowd is subdued, comprised mostly of older couples and small families. I haven't made a ton in tips with Ollie taking half the tables, but I don't really need the money anymore either, so it doesn't bother me.

True to his word, Ollie came hungry. He hasn't had a proper sit-down lunch or dinner, none of us have, but he's eaten enough to fill at least three plates.

Maggie has had Milo working on things like changing the light bulbs over the tables and in the bathroom, and dusting the plants that are up on high shelves, while we work the dining room. I think she's been relishing keeping him busy over the last few hours, and I think she's enjoyed his company too.

As it gets closer to the end of my shift, I remember that Ares won't be here to pick me up, and that Dante won't be waiting at home in the kitchen, ready to eat. I look over at Milo, wondering if he's heard from them again. Dante called right after they landed to let us know they arrived, and that they were going to the hotel. As far as I know, neither of the guys have heard from them since. I'm glad I was able to keep busy most of the day, I have a feeling going home without them there will be hard.

Catching me staring in his direction, Milo waves at me. I return the gesture then focus on what I need to do before closing.

“Do you remember the first time we met? We we're in that booth over there and you came over to take our order. All shy and sweet, with those big, beautiful eyes hiding so many secrets.” Ollie has his hands wrapped around my hips, and he's standing behind me, speaking softly into my ear.

“I remember, but that wasn't the first time I saw you.” I turn in his embrace and set my arms on his shoulders.

He cocks a brow. “I'm all ears. Tell me what it was like seeing me for the first time.” He lowers his voice and his head. I feel the slight brush of his lips across mine as my eyes flutter shut. Ollie's cocky, cavalier attitude is always

there, but he seems genuinely curious about it.

He pulls back and I settle my palm over his heart, his warmth seeping into me without purposefully pulling it from him. I look over his shoulder and think back to the first day I saw him, Dante, and Milo together before school.

“I was hiding behind that big old oak tree, you know, the one just before you get on the school grounds. You three were standing together, and you guys drew my attention immediately.” I peek back up at him through my lashes.

“I couldn’t figure you guys out.” Ollie tilts his head at my statement. “Even from that far away I knew you guys were...” I wave my hand and roll my eyes. “*The* guys, you know. The most popular boys, but I was so confused because you all seemed so different from each other.”

One side of Ollie’s lips lift in a smirk as he listens. “I called you Skater boy.” He barks out a laugh, his head falling back. I smile even though he’s kinda laughing at me.

“What’s so funny?” Milo comes over and leans on the mop he was using in the men’s bathroom. I could kiss him for doing it for me. Maybe I will later. I bite my lip, my cheeks heating from the thought.

“You gotta hear this, Laura is telling me about the first time she saw us, and we were all together, apparently.”

“No, I had met Dante the day before in art,” I correct him. “I just didn’t know he was the same boy standing with you yet.”

Ollie’s laughter fades and he prompts, “Go ahead. You were trying to fit us together, I was Skater boy and...?”

I narrow my eyes at him before playfully casting my gaze over to Milo. “You were the Jock.” Milo tries to fight a smile but fails.

“What was Dante?” Ollie asks eagerly.

“The Bad Boy.” I look down, a little embarrassed of my assessment now, even though I got some of it right. “He was wearing his leather jacket,” I confess, and it comes out kind of like a whine.

“You know,” Milo says thoughtfully, “I’ve never really thought about it, but I bet that’s what most people think about him. He’s all quiet and broody, with a big chip on his shoulder.” Milo looks off into the distance and a wide smile forms on his lips. “Dante, the Bad Boy,” he says in a super deep, dramatic voice.

Which makes Ollie lean over, giggling. “Why was I Skater boy and not the beautiful boy, or man of my dreams?” he bats his long eyelashes at me.

I scoff and swat his chest as I turn away from him. “See if I ever tell you anything again.” I comment over my shoulder while walking away. He and Milo are too busy laughing to even acknowledge my threat.

I make my way to the back to say good night to Gus and Maggie, but I don’t expect to find them in a lip lock against one cooler. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” I blurt out when they untangle and see me standing there struck stupid by the sight.

“Quitting time?” Maggie asks, completely ignoring the kiss.

I nod my head and make sure my mouth isn’t hanging open. “Yes, the bathrooms are done, and we mopped the dining room.”

“All right then, have a good night. I’ll see you tomorrow?” she says, but phrases it like a question.

“Yup.” I pop the ‘p’ sound before spinning on my heels, ready to get the hell out of there before I embarrass myself anymore.

“Why is your face so red?” Milo asks the moment I clear the door. I widen my eyes and tilt my head, mouthing the word “Later.” His chin jerks back, but he doesn’t question me again, instead he makes a move to go through the doors to the kitchen. I grab his arm with both of mine, stopping him. He looks down at me and my hand. I shake my head super fast with my eyes open wide, telling him not to go in there.

Instead he yells out, “See you tomorrow Gran, Gus.” I drag him, as much as I can anyway, away from the door and rush to grab Ollie too. I don’t know why catching them making out like high schoolers freaks me out, but it does.

I release them the moment we’re free from the doorway and jog to the car, sliding into the back seat.

“You wanna tell me what happened in there?” Milo inquires, leaning into the back from the front passenger seat.

I stifle a giggle with my finger over my mouth, but the laugh breaks free anyway. Ollie starts Dante’s car, and the throaty purr of the engine reminds me of its owner’s deep voice. “Gus and Maggie.” I shake my head, unable to say the words.

“What about them?” Milo asks, concerned.

“I didn’t know, I mean, I kind of thought but I didn’t know they were like, together, together,” I confess in a hushed voice.

Milo looks at me with squinted eyes. “She’s a Synergist, like you.”

“I guess I knew that, but I never really thought about it. She and Gus they were... you know.” I widen my eyes, still not wanting to say it.

“They were getting busy?” Ollie asks, sounding oddly proud and scandalized at the same time?

“God no!” I shout. “But they were messing around.” Ollie takes his eyes off the road to look back at me like he needs to see if I’m telling the truth.

Milo does this whole body shake like he has the willies. “Thank you for stopping me from going in there.” He shutters again.

“I think it’s awesome.” Ollie laughs. “Good for ole Gus, getting him some.”

“Ollie,” Milo and I scold at the same time, which makes him laugh even harder.

“Can we forget this ever happened? I never want to hear about this again.” Milo folds his arms over his chest and scoots down in his seat to sulk.

About halfway home, I ask the question that’s been on my lips since before I caught Maggie and Gus’s in the kiss. “Have you heard from the guys?” I lean my folded arms over the bench seat up front.

“No, but they’re a few hours behind us, and they knew you had to work, so they’ll probably call in a little while.” I lean back, not at all mollified by Milo’s answer.



The house looks normal, with lights glittering from a few of the windows. With Rosa and the guys home now, it’s fuller than ever. But it feels strangely empty when I kick my shoes off in the mudroom. Milo and Ollie are with me, so there’s no banter coming from the kitchen where they all usually wait for me after work.

Sadness quickly falls over me. How is it that I’ve become so dependent on having all four of them around me in such a short time? Milo presses a hand against the small of my back. “Everything okay?” His eyes search mine.

I tighten my lips, pulling them up at the corners in a mock smile. “Yeah, just feels different.” I shrug, hoping that’s enough of an explanation.

He nods, his eyes closing on an extended blink. “Let’s grab something to

eat. If we haven't heard from them by the time we're done, we can call them, sound good?" A small fissure of relief fills me. Knowing that even though they're halfway across the country, but only a phone call away, makes me feel a little better.

The lights in the kitchen are low, the faint glow radiating above the tall cabinets creating a welcoming backdrop. Milo heads to the fridge while Ollie pulls out one of the stools at the counter for me to sit. "Looks like some kind of pasta," Milo announces, pulling a casserole dish from the fridge and peeling back the clear cling wrap at the corner, then putting his nose near the gap. "Chicken parm?" He looks over his shoulder at me. "There might be some roast left from yesterday," he offers, poking his head back into the fridge while he balances the dish on one upturned palm.

"I'm good with either." I settle my forearms on the counter while Ollie pulls out the seat next to me.

With efficient movements, Milo lets the door snap closed and pulls down a short stack of plates from the upper cupboard, before addressing Ollie, "You want any?"

"If there's enough, yeah," Ollie answers, setting his phone between us. I peek over at him wondering if he's just as anxious to hear from the others as I am.

"There's plenty." Milo splits the leftovers between three plates. He hands me the first dish to come from the microwave, with a knife and fork already tucked under the glistening, red noodles. I inhale the scent of fresh garlic and tomatoes before slicing through the crispy breading of thinly sliced chicken breast. I don't bother waiting for the others to sit down with their food, it's a courtesy we all usually uphold, but I'm too eager to make the phone call to Ares and Dante to wait.

The fresh herbs give the sauce a hearty flavor I know didn't come from a jar. I'll probably have a stomach ache later from how fast I'm shoveling the food into my mouth, at the very least I'll have heartburn, but it's worth it. We eat in relative silence, other than Milo asking Ollie to pass the salt.

I've already rinsed my dish and placed it in the dishwasher when Ollie's phone buzzes on the counter and the screen lights up. His eyes meet mine then flicker own to the phone.

"It's for you," he says, pushing the phone in my direction. I reach forward, snagging it from him, and hit the green icon while putting it to my ear.

“Hello?” I’m a little breathless as I answer. Dante’s voice fills the room, sounding a little hollow. I jerk the phone from my ear and stare down at the screen.

“Hello?” he calls again. I can see his face on the phone. His dark hair is a little mussed and his amber eyes search the screen.

“Dante?”

“Hold the phone so I can see you.” Extending my arm, I notice a little box in the bottom right corner, when I angle the phone, I can see my face staring back at me. I get distracted and look at myself instead of him for a moment.

“There you are,” Ares says, pulling my attention back to the larger screen.

“Hi.” I wave, they probably can’t see me, but I do it anyway. My shoulders slump in relief at seeing both of them. I don’t know why but I feel like crying, not because I’m sad, except something is making me feel a weepy.

“How was work?” Ares leans his head to the left, appearing to stare right at me.

“It was okay, Ollie and Milo stayed with me.”

“She caught Maggie and Gus going at it in the kitchen.” I glare over at Ollie.

“They were not going at it.” I roll my eyes. “Not yet.”

“Come on. I’m still eating,” Milo complains.

“Well…” That’s all Ares says, I think he’s actually at a loss for words. I know it shocked me too.

Changing the subject, I ask, “Where are you guys? How did today go? Are you coming home soon?” Dante leans back and I catch sight of the room behind him. He must be on the computer the same way we called Rosa a few weeks ago.

Ares dips past the frame a few times, moving around the room behind the sofa. “We’re in our hotel.” He glances away from the camera. “We don’t have much time, but I wanted to see you before we went to dinner.”

“We,” I hear Ares call. “We wanted to see you.” His voice grows louder, like he’s getting closer to the computer, before his face fills the screen.

“What time is it there?”

“Six thirty,” Dante answers.

“So, you’re not coming home tonight then.” I try not to sound like I’m pouting but fail.

Ares lets out a long sigh. “No, we have a dinner meeting in about thirty

minutes, actually.”

“With who?” I almost drop the phone on the counter while trying to rearrange my hold. “Damn it.”

“Edith Whitmore,” Ares tells me, while unbuttoning the sleeve of his shirt and rolling the cuffs up his forearms. It’s a practiced move, one he does so often he doesn’t even bother looking while he’s doing it. He snaps out his arms once it’s complete and shifts his shoulders. The line of his jaw is tight, along with the seam of his lips.

I glance over at Dante, who’s now visible since Ares is leaning back into the curve of the sofa. Other than the disheveled hair, Dante looks like his usual self—well, like he looks when we’re at school, anyway. Closed off and a little untouchable.

“Why a dinner meeting?”

Dante spares a quick glance in his brother’s direction, then answers, “Because Edith is looking for more than a business opportunity.”

My mouth falls open a little at his announcement. “What?” I look between them. “What kind of opportunity?”

Ares snorts out a breath, making his nostrils flare. “It’s not what you’re thinking.” Ares turns, giving Dante a discouraging glare. “She’s looking to make herself an ally, a *business* ally,” Ares stresses, but Dante pulls a face that makes it seem like he disagrees.

Disregarding him completely, Ares focuses back on me. “With a little cajoling I’m hoping she will prove herself useful.”

My eyes narrow, as do my thoughts, what kind of persuading is he planning to use? Before I can ask that exact question, Ollie leans his head close to mine. “Anything on the Leon front?” I hadn’t even realized he’d gotten up from his seat.

“Too soon to ask any of those questions. That would be the fastest way to shut them up.”

“How is Edith related to Leon?” Milo questions next, placing his dish into the sink.

“Cousin,” Ares replies, looking down at his now exposed watch. “We don’t have much time left before we need to head out.”

In an effort to get closer to them I pull the phone nearer. “Will you call again when you get home?”

“If it’s not too late, I don’t want to wake you up if you’re already sleeping.”

“Even if I was, I’d rather you wake me. Dante?” I pull him into the conversation hoping he’ll be easier to convince.

“Believe me, I want to get out of there as soon as possible, so I hope it won’t be too late,” he answers noncommittally.

I open my mouth to tell him to call no matter what time it is, but Ares interrupts me. “We really need to go. Ollie, Milo, go put on a movie for her or something.” I think that’s his way of telling them to put me to bed, he knows I never make it through a whole movie. But that’s when I have all four of them with me.

“I miss you, the way you smell,” Dante blurts out, leaning closer to the camera. It’s like he couldn’t stop himself from saying it, and he wanted to say it before Ares cut off the call.

“I miss you too, both of you,” I whisper back, meaning the words so much.

A wave of sadness washes over me once the screen goes foggy and the red phone icon pops up. I thought I would feel better after talking to them, but I don’t. Milo wraps his arm around my shoulder and tugs me to his side. “They won’t be gone long, another day or two tops.”

I give Milo a sad, but grateful smile.



Even though I didn’t think it would happen, I fell asleep before the movie was over. Ollie took Ares’s usual side of the bed, while Milo tucked himself really close to my other side. It was different having him so near me. He doesn’t put off the same level of heat Ollie does, but it was a close second to Dante.

I slept with Ares’s pillow under my head, and in one of Dante’s black t-shirts, keeping them as close to me as possible.

I woke early before the sun had a chance to rise, but I remained cocooned between them for a long while, just thinking. The phone never rang last night, unless they switched the ringers to vibrate, I would have heard it. So, there’s a good chance the guys never called.

Not wanting to wake Milo or Ollie I slip out of bed, and neither of them stir. Grabbing the first pair of jeans my hands touch and snagging a pair of

panties from one of my designated drawers, I head to the bathroom for a quick shower.

In my absence, Ollie has scooted closer to Milo. I grin at the picture they make. Ollie's nose is almost touching Milo's chest as they lay curled facing each other.

I pick up Ollie's phone. The time stamp disappears as his home screen pops up to replace it. The phone automatically unlocks once my face is visible to the camera. I haven't used any of their phones often, there's not really a reason to when I'm always with one or more of them. Locating the green icon with an empty text bubble is easy, and I click on the square. It opens to a conversation between Dante and Ollie, but the most recent message came from Ollie, and that was around eleven o'clock last night, well after I was sleeping. Dante has yet to respond.

I type out another quick message.

Morning, it's Laura. Everything okay?

I watch the screen for a few moments, hoping to see the three dots pop up when someone is typing, but the screen dims before anything happens. Hitting the back button, I find the text thread with Ares's name and click to open that conversation, which is several days old. Still, I type out another message.

Hope everything is going okay. Miss you. Call again when you guys can talk.

I HAVE little hope of him responding since Dante didn't either, but I keep the phone in my hand anyway, just in case.

"What are you doing?" Milo calls from the bed, his voice raspy with sleep.

Turning in his direction, I wave the phone still clutched in my fingers and whisper, "Just checking to see if the others called."

"Did they?" Milo runs a palm over his face and blinks a few times, before focusing his attention back on me.

I fold my arms over my stomach and shake my head, "No, I sent them a message, so they'll know we're awake now though. It's still pretty early

there, they might not be up yet.”

“Did you already shower, what time did you wake up?” Milo slides so his back is resting against the wall. His golden-brown hair is mussed up on one side and I can see a few lines on his cheek from the pillowcase. He looks so boyish and sweet, his shoulders have a slight slump, and his green t-shirt has stretched out while he was sleeping, effectively hiding his bulk.

“I’ve been up a while, but I fell asleep early. How late did you guys stay up?”

“Not too late actually. I think I fell asleep before Goldie Locks though.”

“I heard that,” Ollie mumbles, without moving.

“I used your phone Ollie,” I confess, setting the device back on the small bedside table.

“I don’t care. Dante call?”

“No, not yet. But I left them text messages.”

Ollie lets out a low moan, and he arches his back in a long, languid stretch. I pretend not to notice the bulge tenting the sheet as he turns over, so I focus on Milo instead. “I have to work again for a few hours, what are you guys going to do?”

“Same as yesterday I guess,” Milo peers at Ollie, “right?”

“Sure, nothing better to do.” I chance a look in Ollie’s direction. He’s settled on his back with his arms folded behind his head. “Let’s do something after though. I don’t feel like coming back here right away. Seems like we never get to do anything anymore.”

I bite the corner of my lip, thinking it’s probably my fault. Up until recently, I worked through the week most nights. Now it seems like every spare minute I’m training with one of the guys, so I don’t accidentally lose controls of our shared abilities.

“What are you thinking?” Milo has one brow raised in interest.

“I don’t know, something.” Ollie pauses. “Hey, let’s go to the movies.” He sits up, a smile beginning to form on his lips, but there’s a mischievous quirk I don’t quite understand as he turns slowly to look at Milo.

“Movies...” Milo tilts his head, looking back at Ollie, and they seem to share a silent conversation. I shuffle my feet, feeling slightly left out.

“We can get popcorn and tons of snacks, it’ll be good. We can relax, and not in this huge, flat bed.” Ollie smacks his hand on Ares’s bed. “We’ll go into Monroe, to the theater with the heated reclining seats.” Ollie makes his brows jump with the suggestion.

I've only been to the movies a few times, it's no fun going by yourself, and Mom didn't enjoy leaving the camper very much over the past few years. I saw a play once, for a field trip with a bunch of classmates at an old movie theater, and it was probably one of the fanciest places I've ever been. Gilded chandeliers and sconces hung from the walls and ceiling, and I enjoyed being there more than I liked the play. I don't think we're talking about the same kind of theater though, the one I went to had small, hard seats that folded up when you weren't sitting down. A heated recliner sounds even better.

"What's playing, anything good?" Milo asks, throwing the covers off and revealing his bare legs. I catch a glimpse of his maroon boxer briefs, which are riding high on his thigh, before casting my eyes to the floor. His baggy shirt was doing a good job hiding his defined muscles, but with one glimpse of his powerful thighs, I remember that strength is actually his ability. Even though his body is honed and cut, the muscles hard and detailed, I know it's only a hint of his true power. Just like you can't see Dante's lion by looking at him, or Ollie's ability to wield fire, Milo could be gifted with strength, even if he was as thin and meek. Instead, he's perfected his body with rigorous workouts, and all the sports he plays.

"I can look, but does it really matter? I just want to get out of this house for a few hours."

"I don't care either, but we at least need to know the movie times." Milo twists his torso, using his left hand to grab his right shoulder as he stretches. His shirt is gathered up at the waist, exposing his tight, round butt. I jerk my eyes away, but I notice Ollie watching me with a smirk on his lips, and he wiggles his eyebrows at me. Knowing I got caught staring, I wrinkle up my nose and purse my lips. I'm embarrassed, but it would be way worse if Milo caught me staring at Ollie, at least Ollie always makes everything a joke.

"Why are your cheeks so pink, Muenster?" Ollie teases, and Milo turns so he can get a look at me after his question.

I press a hand against my flushed cheek, and glare at Ollie. "I don't know," I grumble through my clenched teeth. Ollie rolls his lips in to keep from laughing.

"Oh, are you feeling okay? You look a little hot, fever?" Milo walks over, placing the back of his hand on my cheek, then forehead. I dart my eyes to Ollie, who is holding a fist against his mouth, his eyes dancing with mirth.

“I’m okay Milo.” I take his hand from my head and give him what I hope is a convincing smile.

“If you’re sure?” He doesn’t sound convinced, so I nod up at him. Dropping a gentle peck to my lips, he breathes, “Okay.”

I tip my chin up, chasing his kiss with one of my own. When he pulls back his eyes search mine. “I’m going to jump in the shower, wait for me before you guys get breakfast?” He glances over his shoulder at Ollie. Thankfully, Ollie has regained his composure and agrees.

CHAPTER 7

I watch Milo close the bathroom door and round on Ollie with my hands on my hips, except I don't know what to say. It's not like he did anything wrong, but I still want to call him out on teasing me.

"Something to say?" he quips, his lips pursed as he dares me to challenge him. I narrow my eyes on him, and that's all the warning he gets before I run at him with every intention of tickling him until he cries for mercy.

"Whoa!" he exclaims as his eyes go wide. He lifts his hands in surrender, but it's too late. He has no clue what I'm planning, so it's easy to get my hands on his sides. He's only wearing a pair of low-slung flannel pants, and his bare chest is on full display, an easy mark for my searching fingers as I dig into his sides.

He bends over with a jolt, tucking his arms tightly to his abdomen, and a few bursts of laughter fall from his lips before he decides to fightback. Easily flipping our positions, he pushes me against the wall near the bed and his hands tickle over my waist, then move up near my armpits. I squeal, already knowing I've lost the element of surprise and the battle, now that he's turned the tables on me.

"Okay... okay," I pant, "I give up."

Ollie snorts. "So?" He continues to tickle me, moving one hand under my chin and the other to my side at the side time.

"Pl... ease... I'm... going. To pee." That earns me a dark chuckle.

"That was sneaky, I'm almost proud of you, but I play to win Muenster."

I can barely breathe through my laughter, I'm not even making real sounds anymore, just a bunch of air escaping from my lungs and squeals as I

twist and turn.

“Gonna... pee,” I threaten, which might actually happen if he doesn’t stop soon.

Ollie lets out a long sigh and slows his fingers, but he doesn’t back away from me. His left hand goes to the wall above my head while the other stays on my hip, his finger flexing, but it’s not to tickle me. No, this time it’s as if he can’t help himself. Ollie brushes his body against mine, and I pant, still short of breath, but breathless from his touch as well.

He angles his head down so his forehead touches mine. “I like playing with you,” he murmurs, licking over his lips in an invitation.

“You were teasing me,” I defend, as I explain why I was attacking him with tickles.

“I want you to know it’s okay. You can look at us.” Ollie wraps his fingers over mine and brings them up to his chest. Pressing my hand against his neck, he trails my fingers down, passing over his nipple as he does so. His head leans back and he closes his eyes on a long blink, and when they open again his lids are drooped low. “Touch us,” he breathes and leans in for a warm, wet kiss.

Heat builds between us the moment our lips touch. Ollie tilts his head to the left, his nose brushing across mine as he deepens the kiss, and his tongue slides in long, languid strokes against mine. Leaning up on my toes I wrap my hand around his neck, my fingernails digging into his skin. He leans his weight against me, trapping me with the wall behind me, and the hard line of his body in front. We take turns pushing into each other’s mouths. Ollie kisses like he’s trying to consume me, deep and needy. Abruptly his lips pull from mine, but his body is still pressing me to the wall. Opening my eyes I peer up at him, his chest is rising and falling quickly, and I see a tick at the corner of his jaw as his eyes squeeze shut.

“What’s wrong?” I caress my palm over his cheek.

Ollie’s eyes are slow to open, “I want...” He pauses, his tongue darts over his lips and his eyes fall to my mouth. “I want so much, but the bond. I’m having a hard time not forming the bond,” he confesses, and his teeth snap together as he lets out a grunt of frustration.

Looking into his eyes I whisper, “Go ahead.” If I thought he was leaning against me before, I was wrong, because now he truly shoves my body against the wall with his. My mouth pops open as the breath from my lungs is stolen.

“Are you sure?” he grumbles, not even waiting for an answer before he seals his lips to mine. Both of his hands go to my hips and he lifts, my feet leave the floor, but I don’t even care. I wrap my legs around his waist, and my arms over his shoulders. Ollie groans out a long sigh, then he bites my top lip, the sting almost enough to make me pull back, but he pushes his tongue into my mouth and soothes the ache.

The kiss isn’t sweet or gentle. I jolt as our teeth hit a few times, clashing as our tongues battle. Ollie’s hands are hot as he cradles my bottom, holding me against the wall. The heat that’s always present between us begins to build until I’m afraid it’s going to scorch our skin.

I twist my face away, needing air, so Ollie moves his attention to my neck, slaying me with open-mouthed kisses as his tongue sears my flesh. I let my head fall back as waves of heat crash into me, settling somewhere inside.

The fire coils around me until I feel like screaming from the pressure and fever running through my veins. Ollie’s hand sneaks its way between our bodies, I can feel the hardness of his erection under me, but his hand goes right to my center. He leans his torso back and looks down between our bodies. He has a gleam in his eyes as he watches his hand move up and down. The heavy fabric of my jeans dulls the sensation, but Ollie turns so his palm is cupping me, and leaning close to my ear, he rasps, “Let go Laura, I wanna watch you burn for me.”

Bending his knuckles, I feel Ollie’s fingernails scraping over the material of my pants, sending a vibration through my core. My lower muscles tighten, again and again as he rakes his nails over the seam of my jeans until my head is tossing and turning against the wall, and I can’t think beyond the promise of pleasure he’s pushing me toward.

With a tap of his finger, right where all the heat I’ve pulled from Ollie has pooled, I bite the inside of my palm and let out a moan as I feel our bond begin to form. Ollie pushes past all my barriers, demanding a place where he can leave a small piece of himself with me. Wave after wave of pleasure consumes me. I can feel part of him lingering inside of me, slotting into the place where the well of Ares and Dante’s powers reside.

A calm settles over me as my legs start to slide over his hips, and my knees buckle as soon as my feet hit the floor. Ollie doesn’t fare much better, but he manages to soften our landing on the floor, and that’s where Milo finds us a few minutes later.

“What the hell, I thought you said you were okay?” He kneels on the

floor next to me, his palm sliding over my cheek, Milo snatches his hand away with a hiss and wince. “You’re burning up.” His eyes go to Ollie on the floor next to me. He’s not sleeping, but he’s not fully awake either.

“You bonded,” he accuses, like Ollie and I did something wrong. “In the fifteen minutes I took to shower?”

“Don’t be an asshole Milo,” Ollie grouches, folding his arm over his eyes. I place my palm on the floor, more than ready to sit up. I know from what Ares and Dante said, being near each other after the bonding helped them get their strength back quicker. While I was definitely relaxed and sated, I remained on the floor next to him because he wasn’t ready to get up just yet. By the looks of it, he still isn’t.

Milo offers me his hand, even though he’s glaring at Ollie. With fast, deft movements, he brushes my hair from my face and focuses on my clothes, sweeping away imaginary dirt and grime from the floor.

“I’m fine Milo.” I inspect his face, gauging to see if he’s angry or just surprised.

“You sure?” He looks me over again. I straighten my clothes, beginning to feel uncomfortable with his perusal.

“Leave her alone Milo, she said she was fine.” Ollie heaves himself off the floor, narrowing his eyes on his friend.

Milo’s jaw tightens, but he looks down at the ground. “Okay.”

The awkwardness of the situation amplifies when Ollie looks down at his body and grimaces. “I need to clean up and get dressed.”

I hear Milo’s sharp intake of breath, but when I look at him, his features are schooled. “We’ll wait for you.” Milo runs his tongue over his teeth, the movement is decidedly predatory. His eyes don’t leave Ollie’s back until the door closes behind him, then Milo turns all his attention to me. I fidget under his gaze. Taking several deep breaths, and in a much more level tone, Milo asks, “Are you hungry?”

The question is so unexpected that I snap my eyes up to his. “Uh... yes?” I say, not sure if it’s the right answer. He seems pretty upset.

“Good, me too.” He bobs his head and shifts on his feet. I thought the rift between us was closing, but it suddenly feels tentative. Like one wrong move from either of us could throw our newly forged understanding out the door.

I lift my head high and shake out the tremor from my hands. I’m not afraid of Milo, I know he would never hurt me physically, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous. “Why are you angry?” I hope the direct approach

works better than ignoring everything and letting him come around when he's ready. It's clear that both of us have misinterpreted the other's feelings and motivations.

"I..." Milo seems to be at a loss for words. I don't think he expected me to confront him. He clears his throat and tries again. "I'm not angry." He pauses. "Well not really angry. It's just now I'm the only one you haven't bonded with."

Milo gives a slight eye roll and rubs both of his hands over his face. "It's stupid. I know."

Taking a few steps in his direction, I grab his wrist and pull his hand away from his face. "It's not stupid Milo. I mean, I don't want you to be upset, but it's not stupid."

His shoulders fall a little while he scrunches up his nose. "I was jealous," he concedes almost sheepishly.

He's being honest, and we can work with honesty. Ares told me they don't get jealous, but I think this is a different kind of jealousy, more like he was being left out. "I guess I thought Ollie and I, would," Milo shrug and looks away from me, "I don't know, do it together." Redness blossoms high on his cheeks.

"Oh!" That's all I can say, an exclamation of surprise at how wrong I was about why he was jealous and his confession. I peek over at the bathroom door, making sure Ollie is still behind it. Wetting my lips, I pray I'm not about to stick my foot in my mouth and push Milo away. "You're in love with him." As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I know they're true. It makes so much sense. Neither of them ever actually denied that there was something between them, but they never confirmed it either.

Milo's shoulders rise and his eyes dart to mine, but he looks away immediately. "It's different with Ollie." His words are softly spoken. "We've known each other forever, and he knows everything about me."

"Milo, you don't have to hide that from me." I swallow, my mind playing through all the times I've seen them sharing a laugh or eating from each other's plates. I examine how I felt in those moments. Think about how I feel when Ollie drops his arm over Milo's shoulder and walks, just like he does to me. I can't find an ounce of resentment or envy. The only time I ever remember feeling jealous was in the beginning when I didn't know they would include me in what they had together.

I shake my head, dispelling the thoughts, and gaze up into Milo's face.

His dark blue eyes are a little wide, frightened looking. “I know you love him, I’ve always known.”

“It doesn’t mean I don’t care about you.” Milo flips over his hand and returns the hold I have on his arm. His eyes search mine before he brushes a strand of hair from the side of my face, pushing it behind my ear.

It’s a sweet gesture, and I turn my cheek into his touch as his fingers stroke over my face. What he doesn’t know is that I’d take whatever Milo is willing to give, Ollie too. If this is all I’ll ever have with him, I can live with it, because it’s so much more than I ever thought I’d ever have with anyone.

“Milo, you don’t have to make any promises, I want you to be happy.” Moving faster than I can blink, Milo closes the distance between us. He melds his body to mine, the hard lines of his chest very apparent as his hands comes around my back, fusing us together.

Leaning his head down, he whispers, “Then kiss me.” Not waiting for my response to his request, Milo brushes his lips across mine in a subtle caress. He dips his mouth to mine slowly, his kisses light and teasing. Leaning up so I can reach him, I find myself chasing his soft, full lips.

I sigh when Milo’s tongue skims over my bottom lip. Our mouths never merge, but our tongues slide against one another. My breath starts to come out in quick pants, as my heart rate picks up to match.

Milo tightens his hold on my lower back, and I arch against him, willingly. Bringing my hands up, my fingers travel over his muscular forearms to his hard biceps, and farther still until I feel the width of his shoulders. Milo makes a noise in the back of his throat, something between a moan and a grunt of frustration. His hand fists over the small of my back, gathering the material of my shirt in his hand so tightly I hear a seam pop, but I ignore it.

Dragging my fingernails over his chest, Milo continues his teasing kisses, but his body is frozen almost, immobile as he holds me. I open my heavily lidded eyes and pull away slightly. Milo’s eyes are squeezed tightly shut and he his brows are furrowed, creating creases on his forehead. His breathing is measured and deep. I palm his cheek and place a gentle peck on his mouth. “What’s wrong?” I’m so confused. I know he’s affected by our kisses, I can feel the evidence against my lower stomach.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” His eyes open, they’re clear, but the lines still mare his forehead. Realization dawns, he’s holding himself back. Worried that his gift of strength might be more than I can handle.

“Milo,” I murmur. “You’re not going to hurt me.” I know I’m telling him the truth.

“I could. That’s why I’ve never... I’ve never really gotten close to anyone before. What if I lose control and forget? I could crush you. Without even realizing it.”

“I mean, I guess it might happen, but Ollie’s fire doesn’t burn me, I feel the heat, but it doesn’t hurt me.” I widen my eyes, hoping he’s following along with my thoughts.

Milo’s eyes dart to the left as he thinks about what I said. But he shakes his head back and forth in denial, his lips thinning. “No, I can’t risk that.” Milo steps away from me, like I might force him into trying to crush me.

I follow his retreat, slowly, with no intention of making him do anything. But I do want him to think about it, because I’m sure I’m correct. I don’t think his abilities will hurt me. “I’m not saying we should try anything now, but maybe in the future...” He’s shaking his head before I can even finish.

“Absolutely not.” Milo crosses his arms over his chest, causing the sleeves of his shirt to tighten over the bulk. He’s trying to frighten me. I almost roll my eyes, but I stop myself. I don’t want him to think I’m ignoring the threat.

I pat his arm, showing him I get what he’s doing, but lean up and give him a gentle kiss on his lips anyway. This is something we can work through. “We have plenty of time,” I tell him when my heels land back on the ground.

Milo stares at me with his chin still raised, but I see the slight glimmer of hope within his eyes.

CHAPTER 8

“Come on Milo,” Ollie grumbles for the third time, and this time it’s accompanied with a wave of his hand. The movie he picked starts in less than a half an hour and he’s not letting any of us forget it.

“Go, go,” Rosa urges Milo. When we made plans to go to the movies this morning, we had no idea Rosa had figured out a way to keep us busy in Ares and Dante’s absence.

“Leave these here, I’ll put them up when we get back.” Milo pats the top of a dresser. Rosa wanted a few of the rooms changed around and Milo, with all of his brute strength, is just the man for the job.

“I will, go.” She shoos us out of the bedroom, a small grin playing on her lips.

“Thanks Rosa,” Ollie calls, already halfway out the door.

“Jesus Ollie,” Milo grates out through his teeth, clomping down the stairs. “It would have only been a few more minutes. It’s not a lot to ask, I mean, we’ve been practically living here one way or another for over a year.”

Ollie groans out a long sigh. “Don’t worry Milo, you’ll feel guilty enough for both of us.” I pause when I get to the bottom of the stairs, waiting for Milo to reach me. I snag his hand and he pauses, looking down at me.

The tension from this morning is there, an underlying current that can’t be seen, but felt every time they’ve interacted today. Maggie even noticed something was off when we were working earlier.

“Would you rather finish now, and we can catch a later show?” I offer.

Milo lets out a long breath. “No, let’s just go.”

Milo opens the passenger door for me and I lean forward to push the seat out of the way so I can climb into the back seat, but Milo puts his hand over

mine, stopping me. When I look over my shoulder, he nods his chin, motioning for me to get in. I slide into the front seat and scramble to the middle, Milo following right after me.

I tighten my knees together so I can offer them as much room as possible. It's a tight fit with all of us packed into the front seat. Their obvious irritation grates on my already frayed nerves. We haven't heard from Ares or Dante all day. I don't think I'm the only one growing more worried with every minute that passes.

Running my hands over the top of my jean covered thighs and looking at our seating arrangement, I wonder, "Is this legal?"

Milo leans over me and shoves his hand between Ollie's hip and mine. I lift up as his hand roams behind me. He pulls an old-fashioned lap seatbelt out. After draping it over my lap and buckling it, he confirms, "It is now."

Ollie doesn't waste any time making the turn that will get us out of the driveway and on the road. The drive to the theater in Monroe should have taken twenty minutes, but thanks to Ollie's heavy foot and Dante's car, we make it in just under fifteen.

As soon as the car doors open, I breathe in a wave of fresh air, thinking that going to the movies might not be the best choice, considering Ollie and Milo barely seem to be on speaking terms at the moment.

"I'm going to grab the tickets and some snacks." Ollie brushes a kiss against my temple and jogs off before I can object.

I shove my hands deep into my pockets, deciding to take advantage of the few moments I have alone with Milo. "You're mad because Ollie bonded to me." It's a statement, one I know is true, but I don't understand why. He said he wasn't mad this morning, but he sure seems like he is.

Milo pays close attention to his shoes as we slowly walk toward the entrance of the small mall where the theater is located. "A little, I guess." Milo shrugs one shoulder.

"Will you tell me why?" I grab one of Milo's hands and stop walking when we reach the sidewalk. Turning to face him, I pull him to a stop with me.

Milo's eyes go above my head, but he doesn't seem to be looking at anything in particular. "I honestly don't really know." His eyes finally meet mine.

I don't know how to ask my next question, I'm afraid of the answer. I'm the one who looks away this time. "You think he did it too soon, or you never

wanted him to?”

I feel Milo take a step in my direction, his scent and warmth coming closer. “Neither. I guess I’d always just assumed that we would be together when it happened.” Milo runs his free hand over his head, mussing his hair.

“I know, you explained that this morning, but I don’t understand why you’re still upset,” I explain, hoping to alleviate some of my confusion and his frustration.

“I might not... I don’t know,” Milo stumbles before he grunts, the sound full of frustration. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to take care of you. Ollie knows I can’t get close to people like that. I always have to be in complete control. Even when I play football. It’s so fucking exhausting making sure I don’t hurt anyone, and he knows this.”

I tilt my head, finally understanding a little of his agitation. “Did you ever talk to him about it?”

“No,” Milo blurts, his jaw tightening.

“Maybe you should just talk to him,” I suggest, my voice soft. “I know he’s upset that you’re upset.”

The corner of Milo’s lip curves upward. “What?” He shakes his head, his smile blooming into a full grin. “I think I like having you around.”

I jerk my head back in mock outrage. “You’re just now deciding that?”

Milo leans in for a soft kiss. We’re standing on the sidewalk near the mall, anyone could see us, and I can’t deny the thrill I feel at the prospect. When he pulls away, my heart jumps and I glance around to check if anyone noticed. “I actually already knew that, but reminders are always good. Come on, before Ollie eats all the popcorn.”

Ollie is standing near the door waiting on us, his arms already full with a bucket of buttery popcorn and two huge sodas. Milo reaches for the drinks the moment we pass through the vestibule.

Ollie turns and cocks his hip out to me. “Grab the tickets,” he orders, around a mouthful of popcorn. I reach into his front pocket and feel around, but all I feel is a small ball of lint. When I look up, he has a smirk on his face. “Wrong pocket.” He spins to offer the other, but I cross my arms over my chest and raise an eyebrow at him and his cheesy antics.

Ollie throws his head back and a laughter booms out of him. There are a few people milling around the lobby, and he definitely garners some attention. “I got them, come on.”

We approach a young man standing near a thin, little podium with a slot

in the top. Ollie digs in his own pocket and retrieves three tickets, handing them over. The guy gives them a cursory look and mumbles, “Theater three, last one on the right. Enjoy your show.” Then he rips the tickets in half and returns one side to Ollie.

The theater is already dim when we walk in and there’s an ad playing for a local realtor, but the movie hasn’t started yet. Milo ducks into the last row of seats. True to his word, the seats are large red leather recliners with three buttons, one to raise the foot area, one to lower it and finally, one in the middle with two wavy lines. I’m assuming that’s the heat.

I glance around, noting a few other heads in the theater, then sink into the plush chair. Ollie takes the seat to my left, placing me in the middle. I snuggle into the seat hitting the button for the heat, wishing I’d brought a blanket. It’s damn cold in here.

Ollie lets out a long sigh while his feet rise. He has the bucket of popcorn nestled next to him and one of the drinks placed in the holder between us. As his head goes back, his eyes close. I bet he doesn’t even make it through half the movie.

I glance over at Milo as he’s fumbling with the buttons, moving his legs up and down by inches looking for exactly the right angle. I wait until his hands are folded over his stomach, and ask, “Why haven’t they called yet?”

Milo glances at me, but the lights dim a little more and the surround system kicks up, my chair vibrating with the loud, slow thrum of music as the movie begins. Taking my hand, he brings it up to his lips for a sweet kiss. “They’ll call,” is all he says. No promise that everything is fine, no excuses as to why they haven’t. Just conviction that they will.

I focus on the screen, the sound is uncomfortably high. I’d have to yell to be heard over the music anyway, so I let the subject drop.

Ollie taps my left shoulder and he tips the buttery popcorn in my direction. I take a handful and tip my head back to drop a few kernels into my mouth. The salt hits my tongue first, no wonder they bought two large sodas, I’ll need half a gallon myself, but it’s oh so good. I don’t think I’ll ever be satisfied with the microwaved stuff again.

About ten minutes into the movie, Milo taps my thigh. “I’m running to the bathroom. You need anything?” He leans in close to my ear as he inquires. I shake my head in lieu of answering.

Ollie’s eyes dart up to Milo as he passes, watching him go. As he exits the theater, Ollie focuses his gaze on me. Reaching between us he takes the

soda and moves it to the opposite side. He lifts the armrest between us, so there's no longer any separation. He scoots closer and wraps his arm over my shoulders, and without an ounce of hesitation, his lips find mine.

My eyes fall closed as I lean into him. Accepting his tongue into my mouth when he makes a gentle lap over my bottom lip. One hand goes into the hair behind my ear, while the other slips between the back of the seat and my side.

Ollie produces way more heat than the recliner ever could. I feel the sparking heat flare as his fingers coast under my shirt, his hot palm causing me to suck in a deep breath, but it doesn't burn. The pleasant warmth flares out, covering much more than his hand. My head tips back as I take a few steadying breaths, but Ollie continues his fiery assault by kissing down my neck. My eyes are closed, but I can see the brightness of the huge screen from behind my lids. The colors are shades of yellows and reds, only amping up the blaze Ollie is creating in my blood as his hand moves up to cup my breast.

His thumb glides over the tip, back and forth, with just enough pressure to make me crave more. When I arch my back, he makes a low sound of appreciation in his chest. Jerking my eyes open I scan the rows of seats, none of the few heads I see are turned in our direction. The sound he made is small compared to noise of the movie. I bite my bottom lip, Milo will be back any second. I run my hand through Ollie's hair and he tucks his face in closer, sucking at the tender skin near the hollow of my throat.

"Ollie." My voice is a hoarse rasp. "Ollie," I try again, my eyes falling shut once more when he nips at the curve of my neck.

He lifts his head, his eyes heavily lidded and his lips still glistening from his kisses. "Milo," I whisper. I know he knows what I said, even if he can't hear me. "We should talk to him." Ollie's hand inches off my chest to rest on my hip.

"I know," he admits, leaning back into his chair. He brushes an escaped tendril of long, blond hair away from his face. Looking back at the screen, he lifts his right arm for me to come closer. I lean into him, my breathing still a little ragged, but happy that we stopped before Milo could see us. I don't want to upset him more than he already is.

When Milo retakes his seat, I start to pull away from Ollie's embrace, but his arm tightens around me. The subtle hint is enough to tell me I might be taking Milo's feeling into consideration a little too much. Ollie and I did just

bond today, and he needs the closeness and affection just as much as Milo needs to be reminded that we're both still here for him.

I give Milo an appraising look, and he seems relaxed as he settles in to watch the film. I try to focus on the action movie that Ollie picked. There's a lot of gunfire and fight scenes, which I usually like, but if I'm being honest, the loudness of the speakers is kind of getting to me. The headache teasing at my temples is proof enough.

"I'm going to grab a refill," Ollie tells me. A major fight scene just ended and his words are louder than necessary. He climbs out of the chair without even lowering the legs, and jogs to the door—at least he doesn't run.

"Hey," Milo says, drawing my attention. As I look over he stands. Reaching for my hand, he tugs me up and maneuvers so that he's in front of my seat, and I'm in front of him. Thinking he wanted to switch seats I take a step in the other direction, confused but willing to accommodate him anyway. Milo's hands land on my hips as he drops into my seat, and pulls me back so I fall into his lap. "My armrest doesn't lift," is all he whispers in explanation, his lips pressed against my ear.

My heart rate is already faster than usual from the slight scare I got when he pulled me down, but his nearness doesn't help calm it. "Okay," I breathe out, wondering what Ollie will think when he gets back. Milo rearranges me, getting comfortable and positioning me so I'll still be between him and Ollie.

When he walks in and notices our new seating arrangement and my wide-eyed look, Ollie gives me a saucy grin. He deposits the soda on the other side of his seat and sits right next to Milo, pulling my legs across his lap. I turn my head to look at the screen, wondering if they can see the frantic beat of my pulse in my neck. I try to ignore the fact that I'm in Milo's lap, and the way Ollie's wandering fingers seem to venture higher and higher on my thigh with every caress of his hand.

My neck gets a crick from the awkward angle I'm sitting as I watch the movie. I give up pretending to watch and let my head fall against Milo's chest. I can see Ollie's profile in the light, the flashes of color bouncing off his high cheekbones. Milo runs a palm up my back, his hand large and comforting, as he lets out a deep breath.

If it wasn't for Ollie's prowling hands, I would probably fall asleep cradled against Milo's big, solid chest, but I find myself holding my breath every time his fingers graze over my legs above my knees. I'm not sure he's even aware he's doing it, and every once in a while, I'll feel him stop and

squeeze. Those times are usually accompanied by the rapid-fire of a weapon, or the smack of flesh against flesh during a fight scene.

Milo's lips move to my ear. "You okay?"

My mouth dry, I try to croak out a yes, before clearing my throat and answering again, more clearly this time. "Yes."

Milo's chest expands as he takes a deep inhale. He moves his arm I was lying against so I fall back a little, enough so I can see his face above me. "How about now?" I lick my lips, my eyes wide, and I nod. He's staring right at me. There's no way he can miss it.

Leaning in so his lips are ghosting over mine, he whispers, "And now?" I feel the press of his lips against mine as his lips form the words. My hand fists into the fabric of his t-shirt over his chest.

"I'm good," I reply huskily, the tone of my voice surprising me. Milo dips even closer and runs the tip of his velvety, soft tongue between the seam of my lips. I open, expecting him to delve in, but he pulls back, his eyes meeting mine as he watches me. With a deliberate movement he reaches out, his eyes still on mine, and wraps his hand around the back of Ollie's neck. Lacking any of the gentleness he uses with me, he pulls Ollie over and places a soft wet kiss on his lips. Ollie's eyes fall closed, as his hands grip my inner thigh.

A shot of lust coils in my belly. They're inches away from my face as Milo caresses Ollie's lips with his tongue, similar to way he teases me. Ollie pushes closer to Milo, only to have Milo retreat from him.

Without waiting for an invitation, I jolt up and place my lips against Ollie's. His mouth opens, and he returns my kiss. He nips at my bottom lip and slides his tongue into my mouth to dance with mine. With Milo's shirt still fisted in my hand, I use the leverage to push myself closer to Ollie.

The heat of Ollie's palm slides up my inner thigh, and his fingers caress under my leg, against Milo's lap. The thought that he's touching Milo and me at the same time makes me pant. I pull myself away from him and look up at Milo. My vision is clearer, I'm using Ares's ability to see in the dark and it wasn't even a conscious thought.

Milo's eyes are wide, his pupils expanded to cover most of the dark blue I know his eyes to be. His lips are slightly parted as he looks at me with what I can only describe as hunger. I place my hand over Ollie's between my legs and stretch up, placing my lips on Milo's with the same gentle pressure he gives me. Using the very tip of my tongue, I trace his full bottom lip.

“Kiss her back Milo,” Ollie demands, his voice holding a slight edge. Milo immediately opens, his tongue coming out to touch mine. Milo’s kisses are intoxicating, every time I think he’s going to deepen them he pulls back, leaving me wanting so much more.

Ollie shifts and my feet fall to the floor, but then he’s there. His face right next to mine and Milo’s. I pull back a little, giving him some room, but he doesn’t want it. He catches my lips in a kiss, then immediately leans over to Milo, kissing him. “Laura,” Milo groans my name. Leaning back in, we make a messy triangle.

Milo’s tongue is the first to touch mine, but then I feel Ollie’s too. My nose gets bumped as I move in even closer. I didn’t think it was possible to feel this desperate for them, but I can’t pull myself away. Not when I can feel Milo’s hold tightening around my back, and Ollie’s hand pushing farther between my legs.

But Milo does, he pulls away, his head going back to lean against the headrest as he takes several deep, measured breaths. Ollie drops his forehead to mine, his hand still nestled between my legs but no longer inching higher.

I release Milo’s shirt, realizing only now that my hand is cramped from holding on so tightly. Wiggling my fingers in my lap, I try to get the feelings of frustration and annoyance under control just like my breathing.

The frustration is easy to understand. It’s the annoyance that is unexpected. I’m annoyed at myself for losing control. Annoyed at Milo for starting this here. Annoyed that Ollie went right along with it. Unable to sit still, I jump up. I think about sitting down in an empty seat, but change my mind at the last minute. “I’m going... I’ll be right back.”

Not waiting for their reply, I rush past their legs and hit the exit door with both of my palms. The door slams into the opposite wall with a loud bang. I don’t even lift my head to see if anyone was around to notice it.

CHAPTER 9

*S*plash cold water on my overheated cheeks and let the water run over the insides of my wrist. Now that the moment is over I feel stupid and exposed. What the hell was I thinking, acting like that with two guys?

Covering my eyes with my hand, I lean my rump against the sink. I'll probably leave with a wet spot on my pants, but that's the least of my worries. The image of Milo reaching for Ollie, kissing him sweetly, plays in my mind. That wasn't their first kiss, no way in hell. A shot of anger chases away the embarrassment I was feeling.

Both of them denied there was anything going on between them. I knew Milo had feelings for Ollie, hell, I knew they were more than just friends for longer than I care to think about. But I foolishly thought neither of them had acted on those feelings. I don't care that they've kissed, and possibly more. I care that they didn't tell me, again.

The bathroom door swings open and I turn to face the sink, washing my hands again so I don't look like some nutcase hanging out in a public restroom. After a quick dry where I don't look in the mirror, or the girl putting on her lipstick, I push out the door, into the lobby. Not quite ready to face them yet, I walk over to a claw machine filled with cheap, stuffed toys against the wall. I see knockoff Hello Kitty and Power Puff Girls, but my mind is a million miles away.

Why didn't they tell me? Why pretend to be just friends? The chatter of a few people and heavy steps coming from the theater auditorium fills my ears. One of the shows has let out—is it ours?

How do I talk to them about this? Should I ask, or do I even have the

right to be upset? Yes, I decide, I do. I'm so tired of being kept in the dark. I turn around with my shoulders back and my chin up.

Ollie saunters past the ticket attendant, his eyes already on me as he takes the two steps down into the lobby. I glance around him, waiting for Milo to appear. Ollie makes it over to me, his hand reaching out for mine the second he's near enough. "Where's Milo?"

He gives a slight shrug of his shoulders. "He's coming, bathroom," he replies smoothly.

I almost pull my hand free from his, I'm feeling a little vulnerable after the kiss inside the theater, but I don't. I do turn to face the men's room though, partly so I don't have to look at Ollie's beautiful face, and also so I can see Milo when he gets out. Looking at Ollie makes me think of the kiss again, the one with just him and Milo. It also reminds me how much I enjoyed witnessing it.

Milo holds the door open for another man as he exits the bathroom. He doesn't have the same swagger as Ollie, but it's hard not to notice him anyway. His shoulders are wider than every guy in the room, his waist trimmer, and that's just the beginning of the differences. Milo doesn't wear an easy smile, but he doesn't have that same unapproachable air that Dante and Ares put out either.

Milo almost seems wary of everyone around him, but shouldn't it be the other way around? Truthfully, he could crush anyone in the room. I tilt my head as I watch him navigate around other people when understanding dawns. Milo is always holding himself in check, whether or not he realizes it. He's much more hesitant to approach us. His steps stall before he's close enough to look like he's with Ollie and me.

An awkwardness falls over us. I don't know what to say, but I know we aren't in the right place to talk about anything anyway. I let Milo keep his distance but tug Ollie hands. "Are we going?"

My voice seems to snap Ollie out of his discomfort. "Where to Muenster?" He heads to the exit before I answer. Milo trailing behind with his hands shoved deep into his pockets.

"Home I guess, I don't know anywhere else to go."

"We could grab dinner?" Milo offers almost hesitantly.

"What sounds good?" Ollie doesn't even look back in Milo's direction when he replies.

"Whatever, no fast food though." Milo jogs the last few steps to the car,

opening the passenger side door. “You okay in the middle or...?” He lets his question hang in the air. His lips tighten like he regrets the words the second they leave his mouth.

I release Ollie’s hand and look right up at Milo’s face. “I’m fine in the middle.” My hands go to my hips as I glare up at him. Making sure not to leave Ollie out, I narrow my eyes over in his direction. “I told you I was okay with this, I knew you had feelings for each other. What I don’t like is you acting like this is something you’re just now exploring.” I raise my brows and glance between them.

Milo jerks, and it’s such a small movement I wouldn’t have even seen it if I wasn’t looking for a reaction. “Can we talk about this somewhere else?” He looks around.

I make a point to gaze around the parking lot. Ollie parked the car well away from any others, so no one is around to hear us. But I climb into the front seat and slide to the middle anyway. Ollie rounds the car to the driver’s seat.

“Why don’t you ever drive?” The question comes out harsher than I intended, my frustration showing.

Milo’s brows drop, and he reaches for the door, slamming it behind him. “I drive,” he answers defensively.

“I’ve never seen you drive,” I counter.

“It’s Dante’s car, Ollie likes to drive,” Milo informs me.

“You don’t?”

“I don’t care either way.” I roll my eyes, irritated with his answers.

“So,” Ollie elongates the word, “you’re upset Laura.” Ollie nods his head quickly, looking left and right before pulling out of the parking spot.

Milo makes a loud snort. “She’s pissed because I kissed you.” He folds his arms over his chest, but it makes the front seat uncomfortably tight. So, he settles his left arm on the back of the seat behind me instead.

“I’m not pissed because you kissed him, and he kissed you back, by the way.” I watch Milo for a reaction. A ticking in his jaw is his only response. “I’m pissed because you both acted like there wasn’t anything between you, even when I knew there was.” It’s my turn to cross my arms. I stare out the front window, waiting for them to try to deny it.

Ollie takes his eyes off the road to look at me. “I never told you there wasn’t anything between us.” I let my mind wander back all those weeks ago to when I had accused Dante of being a shitty boyfriend, to when I thought

Ollie and Milo were a couple.

“You told me it wasn’t like that between you. I remember, because I felt like a total jerk for embarrassing Milo.”

“Yeah, I said it wasn’t like that. What I meant was that we weren’t exclusive. You were acting like I was cheating on him. And I wasn’t. Especially not with you. You’re what holds us all together.” Ollie seems almost mystified that he’s explaining this to me.

Feeling slightly indignant, I bluster, “Well you practically said you were a virgin, never really got close to anyone.” My snarl is directed at Milo this time.

“I am.” His eyes widen as his chin tips toward me.

The burn of regret tightens my throat. I feel my eyes begin to water. I’m frustrated, with them, myself, and most of all, I’m embarrassed that I’m apparently clueless. Did I misunderstand them, or did they mean to mislead me back then? Milo acted like he was mortified when I thought he and Ollie were together. I shake my head, unable to wrap my head around how wrong I was.

Ollie sighs, then turns the car off the busy city street and into a shopping mall parking lot. He coasts the car into one of the outer spots, away from any other cars, and eases it into park. Dropping his hands from the wheel, he angles his body to face me. “I might have let you believe what you wanted in the beginning,” he admits.

“We thought it was best,” Milo chimes in from the other side of me. I don’t like not being able to see both of them. But I don’t think this is a conversation for a parking lot either.

Pinching my temples between my fingers, the fading evening light dims as my hand covers my eyes. “You were already having a hard time with Delaney and Mia. We decided to wait and see if you were okay with us.” Ollie lifts his hand and gestures to Milo.

“And what if I wasn’t?” I snap.

Ollie’s eyes go above my head, and he looks over at Milo with a sad smile turning up the corners of his lips. “Then we wouldn’t have ever touched each other like that again,” he divulges.

I see how much that would have affected him, but because we’re bonded, I can also feel the absolute truth to his statement. “I knew that wouldn’t be the case though.” Ollie grabs my hand and laces our fingers together.

“I didn’t,” Milo confesses, drawing my attention. I lift my right hand and

lay it over his. He watches our hands tangle together before meeting my eyes. “I was afraid of you finding out. I thought it might change the way you feel about me... us,” he amends.

The car falls quiet while I think about their motives, and if they really did lie. Once I’ve gathered my thoughts, I squeeze both of their hands. “I understand. It probably would have been hard for me back then, not for the reasons you’re thinking though. You guys have always had this amazing connection. All four of you, but you two more than the others.” I swivel back and forth, looking between the two of them.

“I probably would have pushed you both away. I never would have been able to compete with the connection you share. I would have given up before even trying,” I admit, feeling guilty for my feelings. I wouldn’t have pushed them away so they could be together, no, I was too selfish for that.

“You don’t have to compete Laura. Not with us, it’s not like choosing between one or the other. We’ve always told you our Infinity is different. There isn’t anyone who has feelings for someone that isn’t in the pairing. It took us a long time to realize that we love each other because we are paired too. Not in the same way we are to you, but there’s something between us. I accepted it a long time ago. He’s still fighting it, if you ask me.” Ollie bumps my shoulder, talking about Milo.

Milo huffs, I can almost hear his eyes roll.

“Ares and Dante, they know right?” I pull our hands so they’re folded together over my thighs.

“Yeah, we really don’t keep secrets from each other.” Milo’s face goes sheepish when I raise my brows at him. “Not anymore,” he amends.

CHAPTER 10

Turns out we didn't pull into the parking lot just so we could have a real conversation. Shortly after our talk, Milo directed us to a small restaurant a few doors down from the grocery store. As soon as the door opened, I knew I was in for some good food. The smell of onions and green peppers was heavy in the air, along with spicy herbs. A cute brunette hustled past us with a tray held aloft with one hand, and the sizzle of fajitas leaving a wake behind her. "Grab a seat, I'll be right with you."

We find a small table near a window with paper menus already folded behind the napkin holder. Milo hands one to me the moment we sit down, not bothering to grab one himself. "Come here often?" I ask, unfolding paper to check out my options.

"A few times," he responds. "The street tacos are amazing."

"What else have you had?"

"Me, nothing. But Ollie likes the wet burrito and Dante usually orders half the menu. He never complains, but then he rarely does about food as long as it's edible."

I lay the menu on the dark wood table and the same waitress that told us to have a seat comes over with three glasses of ice water, already covered in a dewy sweat. "You guys ready to order?" she inquires, placing the waters in front of us with practiced efficiency.

"You know what you want Muenster?"

Looking up I meet the girl's eyes, she a few years older than me, maybe. Her jeans are well worn, and her eyes are tired. This is who I would have been if the guys didn't find me. "I'll have the street tacos, no sour cream

or guac, please.” I give her a kind smile and hers in return is automatic, but not insincere.

“For you?” She directs her attention to Milo, her eyes traveling over his shoulders and chest. I see a flare of appreciation, but she doesn’t let it show beyond the slight perusal.

“I’ll have the street tacos too, but I want everything and a double order. Thanks,” he adds at the end.

“And for you?” The waitress’s hands go to the pocket of her apron as she cocks out her hip, waiting for Ollie’s order.

Some of his hair has escaped the band holding it back. He jerks his head, moving it out of the way as he looks up at her for the first time, a cheeky smile already on his lips. “I’ll be the troublemaker and have the wet burrito with rice and beans, and a cheese quesadilla. Oh, and can we have some hot salsa for the chips too?”

She blinks down at him, not saying anything for a long moment. “Yeah, sure... that’ll be right out.” She spins away, retreating from the table quickly.

Ollie turns his smile in my direction. Yeah, I’ve been there too. Ollie has the ability to render smart girls stupid with just a look. I look away before he realizes what I’m thinking.

Milo pulls out his phone and I sit up, eager to see if it’s a call from Dante or Ares. He opens up a gaming app instead. My hopes fall, along with my heart. “I don’t like that we haven’t heard from Ares or Dante. It’s been too long, something feels off.”

Milo makes eye contact with Ollie over the table. He sets his phone down and wraps his arm around the top of my chair. “Let’s wait until we’re home, then we can try to facetime them.” I know he’s stalling, but I like the idea of facetimeing them from our room, so I let the tactic slide.

“All right, I guess.” I look out the window wondering what they could be doing—are they learning anything useful, or will it be a waste of time?



MILO AND OLLIE work hard to distract me during dinner and the ride home, but thoughts of Dante and Ares are never far. By the time we pull into the driveway I’m a ball of nervous excitement. Milo placed his palm on my thigh

halfway through the ride just to keep me from wiggling around so much.

We enter through the back door, like usual, and the moment I cross the threshold I feel the shift immediately. My breath leaves me in a gasp, Ares and Dante are close. “They’re here.” I freeze, closing my eyes and letting the new awareness wash over me. If I wasn’t so full of nervous energy on the ride home, I’m sure I would have realized it sooner.

“What, who?” Milo sounds incredulous. I raise my arm out behind me, asking him to wait.

My focus hones in on their essence, and I wrap the inky darkness of Ares’s ability around myself and extend my senses. Without thought, I go right to our room. Dante is lying on the bed with his eyes closed, soft gold surrounding him, and he looks like he’s sleeping. Next, I concentrate on Ares.

Merely the thought of him takes me to where he is, in the shower. His head is bent low as the water glides over the back of his neck. I have a scant second to admire him before his head snaps up. He looks over in my direction, his eyes fully black. Even though I’m not physically in the room, he knows I’m here.

The aura I see around Ares is like a living thing. It’s black, but looks like it’s filled with bright sparks of silver. The darkness reaches in my direction, winding its way closer to me with a hunger that threatens to consume me. “Come, *Cara*.” His words snap me out of the projection.

Shaken, I look over my shoulder to find Milo and Ollie staring at me, their eyes wide. Before my sight has a chance to adjust, I see the arc of Ollie’s bright orange aura around him. My eyes follow a shift in color, as green melds into the edges where Milo is standing near him. The edges of the colors are tasting each other and fading together, so I can’t tell where one begins and the other ends.

Ollie reaches out and his hand clasps mine. When I look down at our joined hands, I see a flash of white, before the hazy glow of colors disappears altogether. I shake away all the questions I have about those colors and focus on what’s really important. “Ares and Dante are home.”

Milo looks over my shoulder, like he’s expecting to see one of them appear. “Dante is asleep, and Ares is in the shower.” I kick off my shoes in a rush to get to them.

“That’s oddly specific.” Ollie chuckles like I’m being silly.

“Well, that’s where they were when I saw them. I’m pretty sure Dante

was sleeping, his colors were faint.”

Milo grabs my arm, his grip firm but not enough to hurt me. “What colors?” His eyes scan mine, searching.

Impatient, I turn to face him. “I don’t know, the colors.” I shrug, thinking he would know more about this than I do. “I’ve only seen them a few times before. Ares would be able to describe them better. But yours is green, like forest green. It’s a lot brighter than the last time I saw it. And Ollie, yours is orange, it’s like a halo, and I think it’s your aura or something. I don’t know. Can we talk about this later?”

“Was mine bright too?” Ollie questions while kicking off his own shoes.

“Yours has always been bright, it was only Milo’s that was kinda faded, but not anymore,” I call over my shoulder. I’m not jogging, but I might be in contention for a speed walking race.

“Someone’s excited,” I hear Ollie mutter. I don’t bother to deny his words, since it’s obvious they’re true.

I pause before going through the door. Second guessing myself that Dante and Ares really are here. Pushing the doubt away I open the door and peer into the dim light. The lump on the bed confirms what I already knew. No longer hesitant, I hustle over to the bed. Dante’s lips are parted, and one arm is folded behind his head as if he didn’t really expect to fall asleep.

I trace my finger over his brow, pushing a few locks of hair away from his forehead in the process. He lets out a soft sigh, not waking.

Letting him be, I turn toward the bathroom door. Should I wait for Ares to come out? He knew I was coming. Biting my bottom lip, I approach the door, and with my palms out I place my ear on the wooden panel. “Ares?” I’m eager to see him, but when I left him, he was naked in the shower. The image of his toned body leaning against the wall, water cascading over his skin, fills my mind.

“Come in,” Ares calls back. I push the door and peek around the edge. Ares is facing the wall, pulling a pair of gray sweatpants up over his bare butt. I freeze. He told me to come in, right? He straightens and turns to face me. Forgetting I caught him dressing, and that he still doesn’t have a shirt on, my only thought is to go to him.

In the blink of an eye I’m there. Only I didn’t walk. A wave of vertigo washes over me, so I stumble against him. Ares catches me, his eyes wide in shock. “Holy hell, are you all right?”

Ignoring his concern, I blurt, “Why didn’t you call, is everything okay?” His eyes search mine as his brow furrows.

“I knew you’d be asleep when we got back from the meeting. I didn’t want to wake you.” He runs his fingers along the side of my cheek, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

“I told you to call, I wouldn’t have cared if you woke me. What about today then, why didn’t you call today?” My worry that something might have happened to them morphs into anger now that I know they’re both fine.

“We got a late start this morning, once I knew we were coming home today, I wanted to get home to you as soon as possible.”

“Well, you guys should have called. I’ve been worried all day.” I plant my cheek against his bare chest and wrap my arms around his back.

“Are you mad at me?” Ares’s question sounds slightly pleased and a little incredulous.

“It’s not funny. And yes, I think I am.” I didn’t even realize it myself until I knew he was safe. I pull back, looking into his eyes. He’s sporting a slight grin, and he tries in vain to stifle it when I narrow my eyes at him.

“Don’t be upset.” He licks his bottom lip, dipping his head closer to mine. “I was thinking about you every second.” His words are spoken just above a whisper. I swallow, licking my own lip. He knows exactly what he’s doing. He’s seducing me, and he’s not even trying.

“If you were thinking about me, then you should have called,” I chide him, but my voice is breathy.

“I like the more direct approach,” he tells me, taking a step closer and forcing me to take a step back. I start to pull away but he grabs my hand, laying it over his chest, up near his heart. I feel the steady beat under my palm. His pupils dilate as he walks me backward, never getting more than a breath’s width away from me. “I missed you, did you miss me?” Ares bumps his nose against mine as he nuzzles me.

I nod. “Yes.” My eyes fall closed. I expect him to kiss me, but he makes me wait. I feel the brush of his body connecting with mine as my back hits the wall. He crowds me, taking up every inch of available space, so he’s all I can see, feel.

Ares’s hands skim up my sides, and he lifts my arms as he continues trailing his fingers up, so my arms are above my head. Only then does he lean in and seal his lips to mine. His kiss is slow, drugging.

Taking my arms from the wall, I reach for him. My hand glides over his

taut jawline, feeling the rasp of his stubble on my palm as I continue until my fingertips sink into his damp hair. He tilts his head, angling to take the kiss deeper.

I part my lips, letting him take the lead. Ares makes a satisfied noise, more of a groan of approval really. I wrap my other hand under his arm and around his back, and explore the way his muscles move under my fingers, the way he arches into my touch the same way I arch into his.

Ares's weight has me pinned to the wall, but I don't feel trapped, if anything the pressure from his body feels comforting.

I stroke my hand down his spine, feeling the curve of his backside, then the fabric of his pants, stopping my descent.

Ares pulls his mouth from mine and he's panting. His forehead hits my collarbone as he takes deep, steady breaths. "Sorry I got carried away," he murmurs.

I tip my head back, letting it thud against the wall behind me. My breath is choppy, my heart is racing, and I can't figure out why he stopped.

Ares eventually lifts his head, his eyes are dark, but I can still make out the tawny brown color behind his pupils. "Hey," he mutters, looking at my lips. At least I'm not the only one affected here. "I, ah... oh, yes. Next time I'll call." He takes a moment to stumble over the words.

That brings a genuine smile to my lips. Ares is always so cool, it seems like he can walk away from our encounters without a problem, but not now. He's struggling just as much as I am. I slide my hand over his shoulder, stopping where our chests are pressed together. He still hasn't backed up.

He takes a step back, like he's just come to the same realization. I fold my arms under my chest. "You better call next time, and Dante's not off the hook either. I didn't want to wake him up."

Ares tries again to hide a smile but fails. "Got it, from now on we'll check in. Be home when the street light come on."

I snort and roll my eyes at him. I'm not being unreasonable. "Like you wouldn't have freaked out if I turned the tables."

He shakes his head in denial. "Wouldn't happen," he states with complete confidence.

"I know. I wouldn't do that to you guys."

Ares keeps his eyes locked on mine, but takes a few more steps away from me. He reaches for a folded t-shirt sitting on the bench seat. Shaking it out he slides his arms in, then ducks a little to pull it over his head. The fabric

gets bunched up on his side, leaving a revealing glimpse of his lower stomach and abs. I don't even try to look away. Ares's clothing fits him well enough that it hints at the body beneath, but there's nothing like seeing the real thing.

"Wouldn't happen, *Cara*, because nothing could keep me from you." He's not being cocky or saying it in jest. The conviction in his words settle somewhere deep inside me. Ares would always come for me, no matter what.

I close the distance between us again. Wrapping my arms around his torso and burying my head under his chin. I've never experienced the absolute certainty of knowing I have a home, and that's what Ares is. He's my home, they all are. It doesn't matter if we had to live in my old camper, they would never leave me to fend for myself. I love him, I love all of them, for giving me that.

"I love you." I look up into his face. Ares's eyes widen for the briefest second before he tucks me back into his chest.

"Love you too," he adds gruffly.

CHAPTER 11

“So, tell us what happened, did you find anything out?” Milo is leaning against the wall where a headboard would be.

I cuddle further into Dante’s embrace. Ollie didn’t have the same reservations about waking him up that I did. He gives me a slight squeeze and lets out a long sigh.

“Nothing, it was a total waste of time,” Ares confesses, looking at the bed. Ollie has his head on my thigh, taking up almost the entire second king sized bed by lying sideways.

“Really, nothing?” Milo sounds skeptical.

“It wasn’t a complete waste of time, we figured out they’re hiding something, but we don’t know what,” Dante offers.

Finally taking a seat, Ares settles at the edge of the bed. “Yeah, but we’re no closer to figuring out what happened to Laura’s mom or Leon.”

I run my toe along Ares’s leg, getting his attention. “I’m happy you came home. I’d rather you be here, all together. We’ll figure it out.” He turns to look at me, but he doesn’t look convinced.

“She’s right, it’s better if we’re all together,” Milo adds, surprising me a little. “I think we should make the announcement, we’re not doing ourselves any good by hiding her, or the fact that she’s with us. Anyone interested in Laura would know what she is to us, and there’s no other explanation why she would stay with us if she wasn’t our Synergist.”

“You’re right. She’s been with us too long for there to be any other excuse.” Ares rolls his head on his shoulders. “We can say we were waiting for our parents so we could tell them before we announced our pairing.”

Ollie lets out a long sigh. “Good, that’s good.”

“We’ll have to have a ceremony. We can do it Saturday. That’ll give Mom, Carolyn, and Linda time to put something together,” Dante rumbles.

This is the first I’ve heard about any ceremony. “Yeah that should be plenty of time for them, they’ve probably all been planning it for years anyways,” Ollie adds, completely unaware of my thoughts.

“What kind of ceremony are we talking about?” I ask, pulling away from Dante so I can sit up.

Ollie’s head hits the bed when I move, “It’s just a party. A reason for everyone to get together,” he mutters dismissively.

I glance at the others. None of them are meeting my gaze so I’m immediately suspicious. “Really?” I cross my arms over my chest and let my doubt come through my tone.

“It’s not as bad as you’re thinking, *Cara*,” Ares caves. “Food and dancing.” His shoulders bunch up with a small shrug. I’m still not convinced and I glare at him.

“We are a bit of an anomaly though, so there will probably be a lot of people who will show up,” Milo amends.

“Not to mention Ares is somewhat of a celebrity,” Ollie adds.

“A what?” I gape.

“I’m more worried about how many people our families will invite.” Ares ignores my comment altogether.

“They have been waiting for a long time.” Dante reclines back on the bed, his arms behind his head, completely relaxed.

“You’re a celebrity?” I accuse.

Ares shakes his head in denial. “No,” he scoffs. “I’m just good at what I do,” he assures me, turning to climb up the bed to his usual spot.

“Seriously Ares?”

“I am being serious. He was exaggerating. I’m well known because I work for the council sometimes. We talked about this.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t realize it meant that the entire community would watch our every move.” I fluff the pillow behind me with a little more force than necessary.

“It won’t be that bad. I promise,” Ares cajoles.

I still don’t believe him. “Is it really just a party? He said ceremony.” I point in Milo’s direction.

“That’s just what they call it, a declaration ceremony. Think of it like a

wedding reception,” Milo explains, and my eyes go wide at the word ‘reception.’

I let out a huff. “You guys better not be lying. If I walk into some... some,” I stammer, trying to find the right words, “some fucking ceremony I will be furious.”

Ollie lets out a low chuckle. I whip the pillow that was behind me in his direction, he lets out a grunt when it connects with his abdomen.

Ollie gets a gleam in his eyes when he turns to look at me. “That wasn’t very nice, Muenster.”

I tip my chin up in defiance. Quicker than I can blink, Ollie launches himself forward and grabs my foot. He yanks me down the bed so I’m flat on my back and he’s above me. I’m breathless but a smile forms on my lips. There’s no other place I’d rather be. All my guys are home safe.

“You want to have a pillow fight?” Ollie’s hair is loose, hanging down around his face, and I sigh. Reaching up, I trace my fingertip over the crest of his cheek, and when he closes his eyes and leans into my touch, I brush across his long eyelashes. He’s too damn pretty for his own good.

“We need to talk about finding a new place. I don’t mind you guys, but I need sleep, preferably without you three in my bed every night,” Ares mumbles, ignoring Ollie’s threat of a pillow fight.

“You know we’d all end up together anyway,” Ollie tells Ares, before he falls to the mattress next to me with an exaggerated oaf.

I turn on my side so I can look in Ares’s direction. “Did you not sleep well last night?”

“More like didn’t sleep at all,” Dante answers for him.

“Why didn’t you sleep?” I ask them both.

“I did, he didn’t. He never sleeps unless he’s with you.” Dante points to Ares.

“I do sleep, just not very much,” Ares argues, settling back on the bed, his eyes falling shut when his leg connects with my side.

“You’ve said that before, is it really that bad?” Moving to my hands and knees, I climb up so I’m between the two brothers at the head of the bed.

“Yes.”

“No.”

Dante and Ares answer at the same time with conflicting responses.

Ares lifts up his arm, inviting me to cuddle up next to him. “I was used to it, but it seems I’ve grown accustomed to having you next to me, helping me

sleep.”

I place my palm on Ares’s chest, under my cheek. “Sleep, we can talk tomorrow.” I place a gentle kiss on his side near his ribs.

“I’m not going to sleep yet,” he mutters, already sounding like he’s halfway there.

“I’ve been checking out some properties on the internet.” Milo holds out his phone, showing a realtor’s website. “I saved a few that look like they might be okay, maybe not forever, but long enough until we can find, or build, what we’re looking for.”

“Oh, let me see.” Ollie reaches over for the phone. Milo moves closer to him and they both focus on the screen.

“Check this one out, I think it’s the best so far.” Milo taps the screen a few times. “It not huge, but it has a few acres for privacy. There’s even a gym.”

“Everything looks good except the master bedroom is on the main floor, and all the others are upstairs,” Ollie mutters, still focused on the phone.

“We could always knock down a wall upstairs, make one big room,” Milo suggests like he’s given the idea some thought.

“I like it, show me the others you have saved.”

“It would be easier on the computer. Let me grab a laptop.” Milo scoots off the end of the bed.

“Mine is in my bag, in the closet,” Ares chimes in, proving he’s not really sleeping at all.

“Thanks.” Milo heads over to the closet and disappears for a second. When he returns, it’s with a sleek silver laptop already open in his hands. “Password?”

“My soul is black, just like my heart,” Ollie deadpans in a gravelly voice.

“Capital B-u-t-t-3-r-f-l-y,” Ares answers, readjusting his neck and ignoring Ollie’s comment.

“Are you shitting me?” Ollie turns to look at the man I’ve been secretly calling the Dark Lord for a few weeks.

“What, no one would ever guess it,” Ares defends.

“No fucking kidding,” Dante comments, chuckling.

“Do you want to use my computer or not?” Ares sounds a little defensive.

“Did you really come up with that password?” I smooth my hand over his abdomen.

Ares lets out an evil little laugh. “I did.” I smile, agreeing no one would ever guess it.



I run cold water over a washcloth and drag it over my face. My cheeks are pink, flushed from exertion, or possibly from holding back from connecting with Dante’s ability. My skin feels too tight, like every muscle in my body is on the verge cramping. Every time he urged me to use the electricity from Ollie, or Ares’s shadow abilities, I could feel something under my skin demanding to be set free.

Leaving the cool cloth on the back of my neck I brace my palms on the sink, letting my head hang. I’m on edge, and frustrated that I can’t control the dominance I feel when I’m with Dante. He seems to think it has something to do with his ability to shift and his animal. After our training session I really think he’s right. I snapped at him several times today when he pushed me for more.

“Our first appointment is at five,” Ollie reminds me, rapping on the bathroom door.

“I’ll be right out.” I force lightness into my tone. We have enough to deal with, without me adding another ability I’ll have to learn to use on top of everything else.

Pulling the washcloth off my neck, I let it smack to the sink with a wet plop. I look up into the mirror and take in my appearance. My long blonde hair is pulled back into a tight, high ponytail. The cascading waves are somehow sleeker than they have ever been before, I attribute the lack of frizz to Ollie’s expensive haircare products. I tilt my face from left to right. The itching feeling is still under my skin, so I expect to see something brimming under the surface, some clue as to what might happen to me if I embrace the power simmering inside me. I glance at my miss-matched eyes, will they change the way Dante’s do when he shifts? Will they be the same color, or will I still look like a freak even if I do shift?

“We’re going to be late,” Ollie singsongs. “Do you need a hand in there?” he adds, sounding way too hopeful.

“I’m coming now.” I wring out the washcloth and lay it over the sink to dry, before straightening out my black t-shirt. I didn’t have enough time to shower after training, so I take a whiff of my underarm, wondering if I stink. I should have spent what time I did have cleaning up better instead of worrying about things I can’t control. I don’t think I smell, let’s hope Dante’s nose isn’t too sensitive.

We all pile into the black suburban from the garage and within ten minutes were in a much more rural area. While the guys and I were at school today, Ares arranged appointments to see some of the houses Milo had saved on his phone.

“It should be right up here.” Ollie leans his face closer to the passenger side window. Ares slows the SUV, watching the mailboxes for the right address. “Right there,” Ollie says as he points, his voice a little high with excitement.

“You were right about the privacy. I can’t see any of the houses from the road.” Dante leans forward from behind me. Thankfully, the car ride has given me time to settle so I don’t feel bombarded with his powers. I think being around Ares and Ollie helped too.

Ares slows the car, preparing for the turn. “Are you sure this is it? I don’t even see a for sale sign.”

“The address is right.” Milo holds up his phone with the house pulled up, showing the same address.

“Just head up the drive, the agent should already be here.” Ollie’s head is turning from left to right, checking out our surroundings. The lane isn’t very wide, just enough for one car, and both sides are lined with trees thick enough so you can’t see through them.

“Geez, this is secluded. I can’t even see any other houses,” Milo mutters.

“Whoa, it’s pretty rustic,” Ollie says when the trees recede enough to see a brown house up a head.

I lean forward to get a better look. It doesn’t look rustic to me. It’s not new or fancy, but it looks like a really nicely maintained house. It’s set into the side of a hill with two garage doors under the house and around the side. There’s a wide set of stairs leading up to a front porch that spans the entire house. Three small gables lined up above. As we get closer, I notice some of the brown paint is chipping and the porch definitely needs to be re-stained.

“There she is.” Ollie points to a white car parked near the garage where a woman is closing the driver’s side door. She lifts her hand in a wave then

uses it to block out the sun, a smile already on her lips.

“You found it okay,” the woman announces the second Ollie pops out the door. Her smile falters, but she recovers quickly. “Are your parents here?” Her voice is a little tight. She thinks she’s wasting her time with us.

“It’s just us,” Ollie tells her not looking in her direction. She squints her eyes trying to see into the car.

“Don’t let him get too attached, we have a few other houses to look at,” Ares instructs the rest of us.

Milo opens his door next, hitting the button so his seat will fold down and Dante can climb out of the back. I hesitate before getting out, feeling like we shouldn’t be here. I can’t imagine calling a realtor out to look at houses. I know money isn’t an issue for them, but it still feels strange.

“Muenster, come on.” Ollie pokes his head back into the car, his eyes bright with excitement.

I release my seatbelt and step out. I look up to the top of the house; it looks so high from this angle.

The realtor didn’t wait for Ares to come to her. Seeing he’s the oldest, she met him as he was walking around the car. Her smile back is in place, she asks, “Are these your siblings, friends?”

Ares straightens out his shirt cuff while looking at the house. “Will you be showing us all the houses?” he ignores her question.

“Oh, no. I only have you down for one.” She flips up a piece of paper on her clipboard. “I’d be happy to show you some other properties though. Do you already have appointments for the other homes?”

“I told Mia to just call the listing agents on all four of the ones we liked,” Ollie shouts over his shoulder, already heading to the stairs that lead up to the front door. “If we still want to see the others, we only have about twenty minutes here before we need to get over to the next one. Can I go right in?” He turns on his heels waiting for a response.

“I haven’t opened it up yet,” she calls up to him. Turning to Ares again she says, “I’m Brenda Rodes, by the way.” She extends her hand out for a shake, and Ares looks down at it like he might refuse, but he reluctantly gives her hand a swift jerk before releasing it quickly.

Brenda leads us up the stairs, and she explains, “The owner had this house built just over forty years ago, it’s a little dated, but the bones are great. And the view, the view is amazing.” She turns once we reach the top of the steps with her arms spread wide in the direction we came from.

“Wow.” The exclamation leaves my lips automatically.

Ares comes up behind me and his arm wraps around my neck. “You like it, *Cara*?”

“I didn’t realize how far you’d be able to see.” My eyes scan the horizon. Above the treetops you can see the ridge of the mountains in the distance.

“It is nice,” Milo offers, coming to my other side.

“We could always tear this old place down and build. I like how much space there is.” Dante looks around, exploring the side of the hill the house is on.

“Were you looking for new construction?” Brenda intrudes on our moment. “There’s a new subdivision going up just a few miles north of here. They’ll have exceptional views as well, but the price tag is a little steeper.” Her eyes scan up and down Ares’s suit pants and vest, then she looks over at the black suburban we drove here.

“Price isn’t an issue, but no subdivisions. We like our privacy.” Ares turns us both toward the front door. “We’re ready to see this one.”

Brenda hustles over to the green front door, which is mostly glass with no screen. Keys in hand, she starts her spiel again. “There are three bedrooms and two-and-a-half baths, the carpeting is newer, as is the roof.” She opens the door with a Vanna White reveal. “Take a look around, and if you have questions, I’ll be in the kitchen.”

Ollie is the first inside and Milo follows after him, his eyes scanning the overcrowded living room. The furniture is tasteful, but there is way too much for the room. “Formal dining room through there and the kitchen is just past that,” Brenda calls out as the guys examine the house.

“The windows would all need replaced, and the flooring.” I’m trailing behind Ares as he makes notes of the house. Dante isn’t far behind.

Ollie comes from the kitchen area. “I’ll take a quick look upstairs, but I don’t think this one would work. It’s just too small, too broken up. We can keep it in mind for a build though.” Ollie doesn’t wait for a response. He turns to the left, moving toward a narrow set of stairs.

“Brenda,” Ares calls.

She pops out from the direction Ollie just came from, her eyebrows raised. “Yes?”

“How much acreage does this have?”

“There’s five acres listed with the house, the owner has forty-seven in total, but they’re splitting it.”

Ares nods, looking around. He walks toward the front window. “Where are the property lines?”

“I’d have to look that up for you, give me a minute.” Brenda lays her clipboard on a side table and pulls her phone out of an oversized bag. “Here we go.” She walks over to Ares, her eyes scanning him again as she does. She tosses her long brown hair over her shoulder and leans in close with her phone. “This is the property with the house, it’s pretty much a square.” She taps the screen a few more times. “This is the extra acreage, this portion here would allow for an access road, then it widens out behind here,” she points to the rear of the house, “and goes all the way back.”

Ares looks up, his eyes finding mine. “What do you think, *Cara*?” I look over at Brenda, not really comfortable answering with her here. Ollie said the house was small, and wouldn’t work. Ares said it needed new windows, but it’s huge to me. I mean it’s nowhere near the size of their parents’ house, but still five times bigger than my camper.

I shrug. “You said not to get attached, we need to look at the others.”

The corner of Ares’ lip tips up. “I said not to let Ollie get attached.” His brow raises as Dante comes over to my side.

“How’s that different?” I shuffle, looking between the two brothers. Dante offers me a wide grin as he leans over and rocks his forehead against mine, in a rare display of openness in front of a stranger. I smile up at him and tangle my finger with his.

Brenda leans a little closer and whispers conspiratorially to Ares. “Oh, how sweet.”

“She is,” Ares replies, he steps away from Brenda and heads over to where Dante and I are standing. He wraps his arm around my neck again and gives her a wink. Brenda looks between the three of us, her brows drawn in confusion. I almost laugh, but I roll my lips in instead.

“The basement is decent,” Milo announces. “That’s where the gym is. It’s smaller than we’re used to.” He shrugs, taking another look around the living room.

“Let’s check out the kitchen.” Dante nods toward the door Milo just came through. We walk past the realtor all together, even Milo comes with us. Brenda’s eyes track us the entire time.

CHAPTER 12

“*I*’m just saying, I liked the first one the best.” Ollie grabs a fry from my plate and shoves it into his mouth.

“Stop eating her food.” Dante pushes my plate a little closer to me, pulling it away from Ollie in the process.

“I agree, but the house...” Ares looks over at me like he doesn’t want to say anymore.

“The house is on the small side,” Ollie takes over, “and it needs some updating. I was thinking we could stay there and build the house we want farther back on the property. That way if we have any visitors, they can stay in the front house, like a guesthouse. We could make it really nice, like a cottage.”

“Could be fun, fixing it up I mean,” Milo adds. “What do you think Laura?”

I swallow the bite of chicken in my mouth and look around the large booth we’re seated in. “I liked them all.”

Ollie rolls his eyes before I can even finish, “Now’s not the time to be diplomatic, Muenster. We want to know which one you liked best, or if we should just keep looking?”

“I was going to say... I liked the first one the best too.”

Ollie nearly bounces in his seat with excitement after my announcement. “Ares put an offer in, but we need the full parcel.”

“Wait, just like that? We like it so you’re just going to buy it? Shouldn’t we, I don’t know, keep looking, make sure you’re getting a good deal?” I’m worried they’re rushing into this and will regret it.

“You might find something else that doesn’t need so much work. I mean,

you're talking about putting a bunch of money into the existing house and building another one behind it."

"If we like it why should we wait, or keep looking?" Dante leans back in the seat, his eyes on me. The two plates in front of him are nearly empty.

I glance around, looking at all of them. "It seems crazy to me because we were talking about buying a house yesterday and today, you might actually buy a house. I mean, who does that? How much money do you guys have?"

Ares wipes the corner of his mouth with a maroon linen napkin. "Money isn't an issue for us, never will be. I've been working for the council since I received my gift. Plus, we have the security company, we're pretty set."

I squeeze my temples between my fingers. I can't even grasp the kind of money he's talking about.

"If money isn't an issue then why do you guys all ride in Dante's car, why don't you have one?" I point at Ollie.

"Why bother, I mean we've talked about it, but Dante loves that beast and we're always together anyways. What's the point of getting another car and never even using it?"

"If you want to wait, we'll wait," Milo offers like it's that simple. It's not that I want to wait, or that I don't want us to have our own place, it feels like such a big step. There's a small part of me that keeps waiting for the other shoe to drop, nothing in my life has ever been as easy as it has been with the guys.

"I don't want to wait, I just want to make sure you guys are all happy. I don't want you to rush into something because of me." I peer around the table, assessing each of their faces for signs of doubt.

Dante places his hand on my thigh under the table. "Then it's settled, we'll put in an offer."

I drag in a deep, steadying breath and nod my head. It's a big step, but I'm excited. I wish I knew where my mom was, and how she would feel about me moving forward. It tempers the thrill I'm experiencing with guilt.

I drag a fry through the ranch on my plate, then push my dish toward Ollie, my appetite gone for now. "We haven't really talked about your trip. Did you learn anything that might help find my mom?"

Dante and Ares make eye contact, and they share a moment that makes me think they're having some sort of silent conversation. "It's hard to say." Ares settles back into the seat and spreads his arms over the back of the

rounded booth. “Edith is definitely hiding something, but that could be almost anything.”

“You’re giving her too much credit.” Dante sounds frustrated. It seems like this isn’t the first time they’ve had this conversation. “She was dodgy, shady from the moment we met her. She was acting like she was an airhead, all flirty. But I’m pretty sure it was just an act.”

“I agree that she was trying to get us to underestimate her, let our guard down, but having someone like Leon as a cousin probably hasn’t helped her out much in our community.”

“I think she knew exactly who we were, and why we were out there.” Dante folds his arms over his chest and glares over at Ares. “I think she was trying to find out as much about us as she could, just like we were doing to her.”

Ares’s nostrils flare as he lets out a heavy sigh. “Well, if she wasn’t suspicious before, she will be now. Our parents made an announcement about our pairing. Invitations for the ceremony this weekend are already being sent out.”

I swallow a ball of nervous energy, which settles in my stomach, turning my chicken fingers and fries into lead. Everything is changing so fast.

“Speaking of the event,” Ollie clears his throat, “we should probably go shopping and get you a dress.”

I look to my left, making sure my face shows exactly how not excited I am about the idea of going shopping again. “What kind of dress?” If he says a white gown, I’m going to kick his ass, right here in this restaurant.

“Or not,” Milo offers, picking up on my thoughts. “You can wear whatever you want.” My head slumps to the side so I can see him. He probably thinks he’s helping, but letting me wear whatever I want could be a worse idea. If I show up in jeans and everyone else is in gowns and suits, I’d stick out even more.

“Please tell me what to expect. What will everyone else be wearing, and what does everyone expect me to wear?”

Dante leans in a little closer and wraps his arm over my shoulder. “It’s a pretty big deal—”

“Dante,” Ollie interrupts his friend with a warning in his tone. But he snaps his mouth closed and looks away when a feral light enters Dante’s eyes, the amber color turning more burnished.

“Like I was saying,” he continues, his voice a smooth deep timber. “It’s a

big deal, the women all dress up, and the men do too. Even though it shouldn't be the case, an Infinity's standing in the community is often related to the power of their abilities. All of us come from very powerful families, and our Infinity is no different, stronger maybe, but we're not going to advertise that."

I stare up at Dante, the pendulum light over the table highlighting his cheekbones and full lips. His eyes dart across the table but he returns his gaze to me quickly. "So, they'll expect it to be a big affair, especially since Ares was marked so long ago."

I bite the inside of my lip. "Okay." I nod, accepting that I need to do this. I knew being with them meant losing my invisibility.



"I did not think you meant today." My hip is cocked out to the side and I fold my arms under my chest.

"Might as well get it over with, besides, would you rather be at home training?" I roll my eyes. Ollie has a point.

"Fine, but I'm not trying on anything that makes me look like I belong in a music video." I narrow my eyes at Ollie and he has the nerve to look sheepish.

"You made that dress look amazing."

"Dress, it was more like two ace bandages," I snap back, thinking about the teal bodycon dress he had me put on in the last store.

Ollie chuckles darkly. "Like I said, amazing." He leans forward and tweaks the tip of my nose.

"Come one. Maybe we'll find something in the next store." Milo grabs my hand and tugs me away from Ollie.

"How come Ares didn't have to come?" I pout, wondering what he's doing that got him out of going shopping.

"Ares already has a tux, a few in fact. And he's got a meeting he already rescheduled so we could go fly out to Idaho," Dante answers, opening the door into another store. The mall is open air, only attached by storefronts and

cute cobblestone paths. There are more trees and fountains than you'd expect to find in the middle of a city. It's really upscale, not someplace I'm used to shopping.

A bubbly young sales associate greets us as soon as we enter. "Hi, can I help you find anything?"

Cheeky Ollie throws his arm over my shoulder and pulls me in tight to his side. "We need a dress." I jab my elbow into his ribs, but smile at the girl in front of us.

"Great, we got a few things in for the holiday season coming up, formal, casual?" she asks, her head tilting to the side as she looks me up and down.

I fight not to fidget. "Somewhere in the middle," I answer before Ollie has a chance.

"What's the event?" The salesgirl scans our group. We probably look pretty strange, one girl and three guys looking for a dress.

"A ceremony," Ollie replies.

"A party," I correct.

"Okay. So, dinner, dancing, or both?" She doesn't miss a beat.

"Both."

I jab Ollie again. "Would you stop answering for me, unless you're going to wear the damn dress?" I glare up at him a challenge in my tone.

He backs away, hands raised in submission as he fights a grin. "I'm good."

Dante and Milo take a self-preserving step back too, all of them suddenly finding the sunglasses rack against the front wall very interesting. Returning my attention to the salesclerk, I answer, "Dinner and dancing, I think. Like a wedding reception." I whisper the last part, which just makes me look crazy. This girl has no idea the reception is mine. That's probably the last thing she's thinking.

"Okay, and when is the event?"

"This weekend." She stifles a gasp at my response. Her lips tighten in a thin line and she nods her head, gearing up for a challenge.



“I’m not coming out in this one,” I intone over the partial divider of the fitting room. I just know this one was Ollie’s choice. It’s bloodred and skintight, and it flows down to the floor, but there’s a slit clean up my thigh, forgoing any modesty it might have had.

“Which one?” Dante calls from the other side of the door.

“The red one,” I spit, then mutter under my breath, “Fucking Ollie.”

“I picked the red one,” Dante answers dejectedly.

“You did?” I can’t keep the surprise from my voice. I can’t imagine him picking this dress. I turn to the others I have hanging in the room. I was sure he picked the short cream-colored dress. I’ve been avoiding that one. It comes a little too close to white.

“Why won’t you come out, is it too small?”

“No, not really. It is tight though... and I don’t know. It looks like the *Pretty Woman* dress.” I don’t tell him I feel way too exposed, it’s off the shoulder and shows off a lot of skin.

“Please,” he mutters even closer to the door. “No one else is out here. It’s just me and the guys.”

“Shit, shit, shit,” I mouth the words. If it was Ollie asking I wouldn’t have any problem telling him no, but it’s Dante, and he asked so nicely. He’s not trying to make me uncomfortable like I know Ollie does.

“Okay, but you guys have to come by the door. I’m not going out there.” I grab the handle and wait a few seconds before calling, “Ready?”

Several affirmatives come at once. I run my hand down my side to smooth the silky fabric. “Are you sure this is even a dress? It feels more like a nightgown.”

“Just let us see, Muenster.”

I turn the handle slowly, hearing a click when the lock disengages. I give the door a gentle push and take a hurried step back, just in case there might be someone else nearby.

A few seconds pass without anyone speaking. Ollie brings his hand up to his mouth, but I can still see the corners of his eyes crinkle when he tries to hide his smile.

Milo actually turns away from me. I watch as he scrubs his hand over his face and curses, “Holy hell. Not that dress.”

I look down at myself, it’s tight and pretty revealing, but I didn’t think I looked bad, it’s just not my style. I frown, wondering what he’s thinking.

I look up to Dante, waiting for his reaction, and hesitant for a whole other reason now. Will he think it's horrible too? He takes a step closer, his eyes still near the floor where the slit starts. Dragging his gaze up my body, he tilts his head. He bites his bottom lip, his canines puckering the plump flesh.

I tangle my fingers together over my stomach. I've put on a little weight since I've been with the guys, do I have a bulge? That thought has my sucking in my tummy and straightening my back. Which pushes out my chest, so I round my shoulders trying to hide my boobs now too.

Still focused on Dante, I don't notice Ollie snap a picture with his phone until I see the flash of his camera. "Ares will thank me for this."

I narrow my eyes on him, but he ignores me and lifts his hand, he makes a circle with his pointer finger, expecting me to do a turn. His phone is still in his other hand, so I ignore him.

"I'll just try another one," I offer, peeking at Dante from the corner of my eyes.

He's moved closer while I was watching Ollie. His fingers graze the side of my bare thigh, finding my skin through the slit of the dress. He makes a low rumbling sound, which comes directly from his chest.

I glance over at Ollie, but he's no help. He's just watching us, his phone no longer in sight. I push my braid over my shoulder and lick my lips. "See, hooker dress." I force a lightness into my tone, trying to break up the tension.

Hand still traveling up my thigh, Dante's eyes track the movement. With a deep inhale he cups the back of my thigh and moves in even closer, his mouth going to my ear. "You look amazing," he almost growls.

A shiver skates down my back, pebbling my skin into gooseflesh. I swallow and mutter a low, "Thank you."

"How's it going back here?" The salesgirl leans on the door with a few more dresses draped over her arm. She pretends to ignore Dante is in the fitting room with me. "That one is fabulous, what do you think?"

"Not for this event." Milo finally turns back around.

She gives me a quick conspiratorial wink. "Brothers never like the sexy ones."

"Not her brother," Milo growls through his teeth, his arms folded over his wide chest.

She waves him off with her hand. "I brought a few from the back." She holds up the dresses one by one. "See anything you like?"

“That one,” I blurt out when she holds up a champagne-colored dress. The bodice has small flower appliques stitched all over, scattering lower onto the tulle bottom of the dress. It’s not poofy, but it flares out a little.

“Great choice, this will look great with your hair and skin tone.” She hangs the dress on one of the few hooks not already filled, and places her hands on her hips. “Do you need a hand getting that one off?” I know she’s offering to get the guys out of here.

I feel Dante’s grip tighten before he drags his hand off my leg. Without another word, he spins and brushes past the girl in the doorway.

“I think I have it,” I answer her, watching Dante’s retreat. She gives me a tight smile before closing the door. I hear the handle jiggle like she’s checking to make sure it’s locked.

Undoing the side zipper, I slip off the red dress, returning it to the hanger. I walk over to the dress I asked for. Up close I can see it’s a few shades darker than champagne, the small flowers are ivory with shimmery taupe embroidery in the center. I finger the fine tulle at the bottom, noting how soft and light it feels. When I twist the hanger to find the zipper, I realize how very low the back is, there is no way I could wear a bra with this dress. My heart sinks, I’m not sure I’d be comfortable without one.

I already have the straps of my bra tucked under my arms for the last dress, so I decide it’s worth a shot. I really love this dress too much not to try. I make quick work of removing my bra. Grabbing the thin straps, I step into the gown and pull it over my hips. The cool satin of the lining glides over my skin, and it’s light as air.

“Oh, wow.”

“Good wow?” Ollie calls quickly.

I roll my eyes, I’m sure if the door wasn’t locked, he would have snuck in. “Shush,” I admonish him, looking into the mirror. The dress has a really deep sweetheart neckline, but there’s a nude mesh fabric that gives the illusion that it’s your bare skin. The bodice stops high, on my natural waist, with a few of the appliques hanging a little lower in a few spots. The tulle skirts are full, but not like a ballgown, it gives the dress a really feminine shape.

“Muenster, come on, let us see.”

“Just a second.” I hold the dress to my front and spin, looking over my shoulder to see the back. I let out a hiss, it’s really low and I can see my entire back. Removing my braid, I shake out my wavy hair to see how much

would be visible if I wore my hair down.

“What is she doing in there?” Milo gripes.

Blowing out a breath I reach for the door handle. I really hope they like this one, because even without a bra, I love it. “Can one of you guys do the zipper? This one’s in the back.”

I hear scuffling sounds, and Milo is standing in front of the door when I open it. Dante gives him a shoulder check, but he doesn’t even budge. “I got it,” he says with a smile, ignoring Dante altogether.

They all stop moving and focus on me. Milo takes a step in my direction. “Wow, you look... beautiful.”

“That’s definitely the one,” Ollie confirms with a nod. “This one won’t get anyone killed.”

I look over at Dante to gauge his reaction again. He’s always so quiet, and his eyes scan me up and down a few times. He swallows and shoves his hands into his pockets. “Yes, you look beautiful.”

I spin around and grab my hair, pulling it over my shoulder so Milo can zip me. “What about the back, do you think it’s too much?”

“Oh, hell,” Dante curses, and I hear a thump.

“No, it’s not too much, you can’t see anything,” Ollie consoles. I feel Milo’s fingers on the base of my spine, searching through the fabric for the zipper. He slides it up a few short inches and I watch his reflection as he takes a step back.

“Do you like it?” Dante asks, and I nod, answering his question.

“I really do.” I run my hands over the soft, loose flowers then down to the tulle. I do a little swoosh from left to right, watching the fabric sway. A wide smile blooms on my lips. I’ve never had anything that makes me feel this pretty.

“Did you find the winner?”

I look in the mirror at the salesgirl near the door. Milo, Dante, and Ollie are all crowded in the room with me, but I don’t feel bad about it. We aren’t doing anything. “Yes, this is the one.”

CHAPTER 13

“So...” Milo’s tone and the way he drew out the word immediately raises my suspicion. “Ares called while you were getting dressed. He said all of our parents are at the house, they want to go over the plans for next weekend.”

I don’t know if it’s just me or not, but it feels like we keep dancing around the situation. Maybe talking about it with them and their parents is for the best. “Okay,” I agree easily which feels strange, I feel like I should be more nervous, perhaps I will be when it’s closer. I still have a whole week to worry about it.

Dante tucks his card back in his wallet as he walks away from the register. I never even saw a price tag on the dress, I hope it wasn’t too expensive. The salesclerk comes out of the back area with a black garment bag draped over her arm. “Here you go.” She hands me the bag and gives me a wide smile. “It was great working with you, if you need anything else, you know where to find us.”

“Thanks.” I go to fold the bag over my arm, but Dante takes it from me before I can.

Milo holds the door open as we all leave the store. “Where to next?”

“I thought we were going home?”

“You got the dress, but you still need shoes,” Ollie tells me.

I let my head fall back and look up at the sky, “Do we have to?”

He leans his face, so it’s over top of mine and kisses my forehead. “We do. It won’t take long, promise.”

I huff out a breath, but the kiss softened me a bit. We roam around the mall until we find a shoe store that has tons of high heels in the display

window. I hope none of them have their hopes up, because I'm not wearing any of those.

The door chimes when Dante pulls it open. A petite brunette with a pixy cut lifts her head up to look in our direction. Lifting her hand in a wave, she calls, "Have a look around, let me know if you want to see anything." Then she returns to what she was doing.

The shoes are displayed against the wall and range in style from elegant, to what I would call stripper shoes. Most of the heels are impossibly high, they look more like torture devices than shoes.

"What about these?" Ollie picks up a baby pink stiletto. I shake my head and mouth a big "No." They wouldn't even match with the dress. I think he's mostly just teasing me.

Milo mostly stands in the center of the store near a bench seat and looks around. Dante is much more tactile, and I find him wandering around, touching all the shoes, much more interesting than all the displays.

I force myself to look away from them and focus on finding something that will work so we can get home. I make a trip around the store looking up and down the walls. Near the bottom, by the register, I see a display of flats. They almost look like slippers, but they have pink ovals on the bottom for walking, so I'm assuming they're shoes. Dante approaches me, looking down where I am.

I bite my lip. "Do you think I could get away with something like this? The hem of the dress just grazes the floor."

He gives one shoulder a lazy shrug. "You don't even have to wear shoes."

I pick up a taupe-colored shoe, but my eyes are drawn to the pair covered in little three-dimensional flowers—they're white with little splashes of red and green. I turn my attention back to the flat in my hand. The shoe is light, and the leather material is soft. I turn to face the register. "Can I see these in an eight, or eight and a half, please?"

The brunette lifts her head again and now that we're closer, I can see the tiny ring she has in her nose and her dramatic makeup. She looks down at the shoe and heaves a sigh. "Sure, the beige ones?"

I nod and look down at the display again. Thinking quickly, I reach for the flower shoes too. "And these please."

She gives me a tight, fake smile and spins around. "What's her deal?" Ollie asks when she's out of sight.

"No clue," Milo adds, coming closer to our group.

“We don’t have the rose ones left in an eight and a half, but I have both sizes in this one.” She deposits three little boxes on the bench beside me. Not giving me much else, she turns and goes back to the counter where the register is and ignores us again.

“Here, have a seat.” Dante urges me to the bench. Ollie picks up one of the boxes and examines it. He lifts the lid and pulls out the shoes, which are all folded together. It’s the flower ones. Before I can Dante reaches for one of the shoes, he flips it around in his hand one or twice then focus on me. “Are these slippers?”

“I don’t think so, they have a sole on the bottom, see?” I turn the shoe so he can see the bottom. He shakes his head but lifts up my foot to remove my sneaker. My old shoes are long gone, they were traded for white slip-on vans not long after the clothes first arrived.

Ollie picks up the other box and takes out the taupe ones too. “These are the bigger ones, if you need them.”

Dante slides his thumb up my instep and I squirm away from him. “Knock it off. My feet are nasty I’ve been in these shoes for hours.” Ignoring me, he brushes his fingers over my bare toenails.

“We should paint these,” he says, almost to himself.

I snatch the shoe and push my foot in, using my finger to pull the back up and over my heel. I wiggle my toes, but they don’t feel too tight. I grab the other one so I can walk around just to make sure, but they feel amazing, almost like I don’t even have shoes on, except I have padding under my feet.

“Wow, these are so comfortable.” I go up to my tippy-toes then back down, taking a few steps.

“Should you get a pair of heels too?” That comes from Ollie.

I gaze back at him and snort. “Only if you want me to break my neck.”

He picks up the two boxes of size eights, and lifts them in the air. “We’ll take both of these.”



“YOU GUYS HUNGRY?” Rosa calls the moment the door closes.

“Always,” Dante replies, not bothering to take off his shoes. Milo has my dress bag and the little sack with both of my new shoes. After seeing the total when the girl rang them up, I wanted to leave and find something else, but

Dante just ignored my protests and handed over his credit card again.

As we head toward the kitchen, the heavy scent of seared meat fills my nose. The kitchen is full, and Milo and Ollie's parents are already here. The men are hanging out near the island or in the living room, picking at a couple of trays with small pieces of meat and cheese, chatting.

Linda, Carolyn, and Rosa are all seated at the island counter. Rosa is spinning the stem of a wine glass, while Linda has a mug in front of her.

I scan the room again looking for Ares, but I already know he's not here. "How was your trip, find what you needed?" Linda spins to face our group. Dante is already heading over to the snacks laid out on the coffee table.

Milo holds up the two bags as an answer. "Here, let me put those away," I offer, touching the bags.

"I can do it," Milo volunteers quickly.

I shake my head in denial. "I got it." Not only do I want to give them a few minutes to visit with their parents, but I want to find Ares too.

I excuse myself, by saying, "I'll grab Ares and put these away, be right back." I lean forward and Milo instinctually leans down so I can place a swift kiss on his lips, while I grab the bags. His cheeks have a rosy blush when I stand back, but he gives me a reassuring smile.

Making a quick retreat I head toward Ares's office first, my bet is he's still working. I hear the low thrum of his voice before I make it to the slightly open door. A thrill of excitement sends butterflies through my stomach. He's close, I know I won't really be able to sneak up on him, but I slow my steps and creep up the hall, nearing the door anyway.

"Laura's home, I'm about done for the night," Ares announces, and I hear a desk drawer close and the squeak of a chair.

"Just because she's here you're going to run off. I never would have guessed Ares Costa would allow himself to be leashed." Mia's voice holds a thread of teasing, but I hear the challenge as well.

Ares ignores her baiting ploy. "Scott said there was an issue with the Bennett job, but his message was vague. Let me know if he submits a complaint about the client." The chair creaks again.

Finally reaching the office, I use my free hand to push the door open the rest of the way. It glides open on silent hinges. Ares is tugging the bottom of his vest down, standing behind his desk. Once my eyes land on him I don't look away, he draws all my attention.

His eyes connect with mine and he straightens. "I was just coming for

you,” he tells me, his voice somehow different than it was just moments ago when he was talking to Mia.

I lean against the doorframe. “I found you first.”

My words cause the corner of his lip to lift. “That you did.” He almost sighs as he rounds the desk and fingers the black garment back over my arm. “Please tell me this is the red dress,” he breathes against my lips.

I chuckle darkly. “You’ll have to wait and see.” Ares’s lips find mine. He kisses me sweetly for a long second, and then delivers one final nip to my bottom lip before pulling back. When I look up, his eyes are black with desire, and I love that he doesn’t hide that part of himself from me. That he lets me see just how much I affect him.

A desk drawer slams and I jolt, already having forgotten Mia’s presence. Ares straightens to his full height and takes the bag from my arm. “See you tomorrow,” he calls over his shoulder, guiding me out the door with his hand on the small of my back.

“I need to drop these by our room. I think everyone is waiting on you to eat, if you want to go ahead, I’ll catch up.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” There’s a teasing note in his voice.

Spinning so I’m walking backward, I playfully poke him in the chest. “Why would I want to get rid of you, I just found you.” Ares snags my hands and pulls me against his chest.

“I was wondering the same thing?” His eyes search mine before he tucks my head under his chin and holds me close. The plastic bag crinkles but he doesn’t let me go. I melt into his embrace, loving the closeness between us.

“Did you guys have fun today?”

I pull back and give him a skeptical glare. “We went to the mall.” I hope my tone is enough to tell him how fun I thought it was.

Ares begins walking again, guiding me down to our room. “I thought women loved to shop?”

“Not this one,” I mutter, thinking about how I’ve always shopped in thrift shops or chain stores like Walmart. The upscale malls and shops make me feel like an imposter. Like they know by looking at me I can’t afford anything they have.

“Well, it looks like you found what you needed anyway,” he continues.

“I did.” Thinking about the dress brings a smile to my lips, I really do love it.

When we arrive at the bedroom, he opens the door and waves his hand for

me to enter. I take the two small shoeboxes out of the bag and place them on an empty shelf near the floor. Ares hangs my garment bag in the area deemed mine, going for the zipper right away.

“Uh uh.” I lay my hand over his to keep him from opening the bag.

“Why not, they got to see it?” He sounds irritated that I’m keeping him from looking.

I roll my lips in to keep the grin from my face and cock my hip out to the side. “Then you should have come with us,” I challenge.

Ares’s eyes narrow. “That’s not fair.” He lets go of the zipper but flips his hand over and grabs mine instead.

“You once told me you play dirty, why shouldn’t I?” I don’t even bother trying to pull free, I’m exactly where I want to be.

He chuckles darkly and it sounds kinda evil. A shiver skates down my spine, but it’s not fear, oh no, it’s excitement. “I did tell you that, didn’t I? Well, it was a fair warning.” Ares licks his bottom lip and pushes farther into my space. There’s nowhere for me to go with the closet wall behind me, so I step back and lean against the wall to watch his approach.

His hands go above my head, caging me in. His body is still too far away, but he dips his face to the side of my neck. He breathes me in, making a satisfied sound when he exhales against my skin. His breath is hot, sending a wave of anticipation to my belly. Bringing my hands up between us, I pull him closer.

He comes easily, but I need more. I need to feel all of him. I want to feel his hands on my body, his skin against mine. Pushing away from the wall, I walk him backward. His dark eyes are open and watching my hands as I tug the bottom of his shirt free from his belted pants. Ares’s hands hang loosely by his sides, as he lets me lead him from the closet to the room. He stops when his heels hit the bed.

I look up at him through my lashes and slide the bottom button of his shirt open. He doesn’t stop me, and his breathing picks up, quick pants of air leaving his parted lips as his eyes grow heavily lidded. Working my way up to the last button, I push his shirt open, my palms running up over his pectoral muscles and continuing over his shoulders to push the shirt off his body.

Ares lets the shirt drop to the bed and I’m free to explore him. My eyes scan his chest and stomach. I’ve seen all of this before, and every time it’s amazing, but something about this feels different, more deliberate. I know

that I took his shirt off, that I am the one asking him for something.

Ares finally puts his hands on me, and he starts on the sides of my thighs. Pushing upward until his hands are under my t-shirt and around my waist. I lift my arms in the air as an invitation for him to remove my shirt. With his eyes locked on mine, he caresses all the way up my sides, taking the shirt with him. I shake my hair down my back once it's free. Ares's eyes rake down my body. His tongue peeks out as he gazes at my black and pink lace bra. I spin, giving his access to my back, expecting him to remove it.

Ares's fingers push my hair to the side, over my shoulder. I feel his heart as he steps closer, leaning over me as he traces his lips from the crest of my shoulder, then over to my neck. When he uses his teeth on the spot where my neck and shoulder meet, I shiver, pulling in a deep breath. He settles me by placing his hands on my hips and squeezing.

My hands ball into fists since I'm eager to touch him, but not wanting him to stop what he's doing either. Ares moves in even closer, his front connecting with my back. His hands continue to travel around to my lower stomach, to the waistband of my leggings.

Mouth at my ear, he whispers, "Do you want these on or off?"

I bite my lip, we've already been gone for five minutes, how long before someone will come to look for us? I don't want to leave this room. Sensing my indecision, his hands move from my waist to rest higher on my ribcage.

I spin around to face him. Opening my mouth, I want him to ask him if he can guarantee us a few minutes alone. I need time with him, with each of them. "Everyone is waiting on us."

Ares drops his forehead to mine. "I know, *Cara*."

"Can we, can we just stay here, can you tell them to eat without us?" I bite my lip, almost taking the words back as soon as I utter them, but I don't regret them. I only regret that I want time alone with Ares, with each of them, but I don't know how to manage that yet.

"You want to stay here, with just me?"

I nod, looking down at the ground. Ares lifts my chin with his fingers. "Don't do that," he admonishes me. I look away again, feeling even more guilty that I asked.

"Laura." His voice is firm. I can't ignore him so look up into his eyes.

He traces his fingers over the swell of my left breast. "There's nothing wrong with asking to be alone, for any reason. If you want to talk, or if you want to connect. You don't need to feel like you're doing something wrong,

or feel guilty.”

“How do I ask though? How do I tell Dante and Milo to stay away for a little while? That I need you?”

“You just did.” Ares leans down and kisses me softly, and bringing his hand up to the back of my neck, he continues. “We all need you too, *Cara*. All of us understand.” He pulls away from me abruptly. Reaching into his front pocket he pulls his phone out. Tapping a few buttons, he goes to lift the phone to his ear.

I place my hand over the screen before he can. “Are you sure?” I whisper, wondering what he’s going to tell them. Will they all know what we’re doing? Even their parents? That thought sends a sobering jolt through me.

Ares pulls the phone free and places it at his ear. “Hey, yeah, she found me.” He goes silent, listening to the person on the phone. “I know, that’s why I’m calling. Laura wants to take a quick shower since we ran off right after training. We’ll be there in a little while. Go ahead and eat without us.” He listens again for a moment. Never breaking eye contact, he adds, “We’ll be down later to talk about this weekend.”

After a quick goodbye, he tosses the phone behind him on the bed. Ares’s eyes are his usual tawny brown, and the phone seems to have abated some of the desire he was feeling. Reaching for me again, he pulls me in closer for a hug. My arms wrap up under his arms and around his back. I nestle my cheek against his bare skin, tucking myself as close as humanly possible.

“We can stand here all night, or you can go have a shower. Just because you need time with one of us doesn’t mean anything other than that.” Ares’s palm glides up my bare back.

I know he’s telling me that there aren’t any expectations, he’s told me this before. “What if I don’t want to just stand here, or take a shower yet?” I let my hands roam over his back.

“I’m sure I could find a way to entertain you.” His hand dips a little lower, brushing over my butt. Feeling brave, I slide my fingers under the waistband of his pants, but I can’t get very far because of the belt, except it still feels like I passed some sort of barrier.

Ares’s hands go to my waist again and he lifts me so my toes just barely graze the ground, before spinning us so my back is to the bed. I wrap my arms over his shoulders, liking the feel of my body against his. Keeping me plastered to him, he goes to kneel on the bed. Releasing one arm, he plants it on the mattress and takes me with him as he crawls up to the pillows.

Neither of us has spoken or looked away from each other. There's an intimacy in our gaze. We both know exactly where this is heading. Settling me on the pillows, Ares looks down my body. His lips are parted so I can hear the heavy breaths he's taking. "Seeing you in my bed, *Cara*..." He groans, trailing his hand from my thigh and up the side of my body, until he reaches my stomach. Ares guides his hand up the center of my body, from my belly button to the hollow of my throat. He watches his finger, fascinated by his hands on my skin.

Ares flicks his eyes up to me. "You okay?" I nod quickly. I still want him, need him to touch me, but it feels more arranged, not as natural after the phone call.

"I need your words, sweetheart. I always need to hear you tell me."

I swallow and clear my throat. "Yes, I'm okay."

"Good." Ares's knees are on either side of my legs and he's leaning over me, but not touching enough of me. Tentatively, I bring my hand up to his jaw, feeling the coarse stubble under my palm. I thread my fingers into his hair over his ear, making his eyes fall closed. He leans in, bringing his face close to mine before dropping a soft kiss on my lips.

He tilts his head from left to right, taking the kiss deeper. I open for him, loving the way he uses his teeth to give me little nips on my lips. I run my hand down his back, applying a little pressure, hoping he'll give me more than just his lips.

He makes a low sound against my mouth. I know he knows what I want, his skin on mine, but he's going to make me wait for it.

Ever so slowly, Ares brings his hand up and wraps it under my neck, then he lifts and brings me up to his mouth. He pulls my bottom lip into his mouth and sucks, before releasing me. I arch my neck, letting my head fall back. He moves down, peppering my neck with little kisses, and bites. My body arches off the bed when he finds a spot under my ear, my fingernails digging into his scalp and back. Bracing himself above me on one hand, I feel Ares's knee part my legs. I let my thighs fall open and accept him.

With patience I don't possess, Ares lowers his body to mine, his hips between my thighs. But there's still too much between us. Reaching down, I try to release his belt, but he flattens his stomach to mine, trapping my fingers.

Leaning back he looks down at me, and his eyes are completely black. I lose my breath, he's so beautiful. "Are you okay?" I drag my hand from

between our bodies and run my finger under his eye.

Ares's voice is deep and thick when he answers, "Never better." Taking my hand off his face, he lifts it above my head and squeezes my wrist. Switching hands, he grabs my other wrist and brings it up to his mouth, biting me hard enough that I suck in a quick breath through my teeth in surprise. It was almost enough to hurt. He then places it above my head with the other, a warning. Ares trails his finger down my forehead, and over my nose and chin, until he reaches the center of my bra over my chest.

"I might need to save this." Ares drags his fingers over the lace cup, brushing across my nipple in the process. "I still have the other one." I look down at his hand caressing me. I'd almost forgotten about the one I lost the night we bonded.

Lifting himself off of me, Ares lies on his side facing me, and I tuck my arms back down between us, turning to face him. With purpose, I lean in, almost placing my lips on his. Instead of kissing him, I open my mouth and give his chin a little nip, he freezes, and not even a breath passes his lips.

My eyes fall shut as I savor every moment with him. I place my palm over his heart, it's beating fast, and he finally drags in a breath. Inching my body even closer to his, I move a little lower so I have access to his neck. Turnabout is fair play, since Ares is always kissing and biting my neck.

He tilts his head back, content to let me explore. I feel the short, crisp hairs on his chest tickling my fingers as I run my palm all over his torso. Without much experience I can only emulate what he does to me, and hope it feels half as good as he makes me feel.

Using the tip of my tongue, I lick the underside of his jaw and I feel his body tense, but he doesn't try to stop me. With my eyes open I deliver another long lick, this time from the base of his throat, winding my way up to his ear, as I watch to see his expression. Ares's mouth falls open, and he lets out a throaty sigh. Feeling brave, I push him over onto his back. Ares's eyes snap open when I settle myself over his lower stomach, straddling his waist.

He doesn't waste any time grabbing my hips and holding me against him. I return my palms to his chest, running my fingers up and down over him. I almost squirm at how delicious he looks under me. Ares makes me feel powerful, even though I know he likes to be in control he always makes it clear that I'm the one in charge of anything that happens between us.

I lean down, placing my hands on either side of his head, connecting our chests, and kiss him. His hand sweeps up my spine and grips the back of my

neck. Excitement fills me, it's like my body knows that's his spot. I lean forward on my knees to deepen the kiss. The heavy weight of Ares's abilities uncoils in my chest, reaching out for him. I glide the shadows over his skin, surrounding us both in the darkness that comes so easily.

Ares breaks the kiss, his neck arching back as he lets out a low groan. Opening his eyes lazily, he gazes up at me, licking over his bottom lip. His eyes are flickering with bright white dots, much like they looked the night we bonded. It doesn't frighten me the way it did that night, but there's definitely something otherworldly about it.

He sits straight up and wraps his arms around my back, and my breath leaves me in a huff as he fuses our chests together. Without giving me a second to recover, he seals his lips to mine. His tongue slides into my mouth, licking and sucking over mine. Fighting to keep up, I return his kiss with just as much passion. "My turn to play," Ares murmurs between kisses. Fingers on the clasp of my bra, he loosens the hooks. Eager to feel him against me, I drop my arms and let the lacy material droop down my arms. He backs away enough so the fabric falls in a heap between our bodies, and he snatches it free, tossing it off the bed. Slowly, he pushes against me. Not stopping until he leans me all the way back to the mattress, and my legs unfold to go around his waist as he switches our positions, with me flat on the bed and him over me. His hips rock as his whole body undulates against me. I cling to his neck, unable to even kiss him back as my body processes each and every touch. The heat of his chest against mine, the brush of his skin across mine. Every move he makes tightens my sensitive nipples.

Ares's hand curls around my hip, his fingers near the bottom of my butt, lifting me so I'm even closer to him. He's leaning on his other elbow, his mouth near my ear. My heart is beating so hard I feel like it will come right out of my chest, and my breath is just as choppy.

Ares drags his fingers out from under me and I miss the extra pressure immediately, but then he toys with the waistband of my leggings, his fingers sliding under enough so he exposes my hip.

"Laura." He peppers my neck with kisses and I hum a response. Ares puts his forehead on my collarbone. "Sweetheart, can I touch you?" His words are rough, his voice deep.

"Yes, Ares." I know he'll want to hear me say it's okay. As soon as I utter the words, I place my hands on his cheeks and pull him up to me. With my fingers woven into his dark hair, I kiss him again. Adjusting his body, he

slides the tips of his fingers under my waistband. I suck in my stomach as I feel the rough pads of his fingers below my belly button—this is new. My hips arch into his hand, he's so close to touching me I can hardly think of anything else.

My heart rate picks up even faster. I try to focus on his kiss, how soft his tongue is, the way he glides the tip over mine, but then his hand moves and I'm back to thinking about where his fingers are. What if I didn't shave right, should I have taken a shower? I was in school all day, then training for a little while, then shopping. Oh god, I probably stink.

My knees close around his hips and arm as Ares's hand slides lower, the tips of his finger brushing against my pubic bone. I tighten my legs even more. I don't want him to stop, I just don't have any idea what I'm doing, what to expect, what he expects. He has to know I'm a virgin, but what if he doesn't? I mean we've never really talked about it.

Ares pulls back, his eyes opening to look down at me lazily. I roll in my lips, should I say something? "I'm a virgin," I blurt, before giving the idea any real thought.

Ares jerks back, probably more from my overly loud tone than the statement itself. "Okay, I kind of thought you were. Do you want to stop?" he drawls, making sure I hear every word.

I shake my head quickly in denial, but add, "I just wanted you to know. I don't... I... well... I thought you should know."

I close my eyes, feeling foolish now for letting it slip out the way I did. "Hey, look at me," Ares coos softly, brushing his knuckle across my cheek. His other hand is still down my pants, but it's not moving. When I don't immediately open my eyes, he shifts his weight, leaning on his elbow as his fingers inch away from my center.

I place my hand on his arm, stopping his retreat. If I'm ready to have sex, I should be ready to talk about it, right? "Ares, I don't want to stop, this is just all so new. I know you're not a virgin. And I don't know. I was feeling a little... insecure. What if I don't look like what you're expecting? Feel the same? I mean, I didn't even start shaving, shaving down there until I moved in here. And I got all sweaty when I was training," I ramble, all my thoughts come spewing out in a rush of words.

Ares's eyes soften, the corners tilting down the tiniest bit. "I swear on our Infinity that you don't need to worry about any of that." He pushes his hand over near my hip, instead of over my lower stomach, still under my pants and

panties. His voice is a little more gruff when he continues, “I can promise you, I love every inch of you, inside and out.”

I swallow at his proclamation of love, his words ringing true. I feel the same way about him.

“I’ve been imagining what you would look like, feel like, for six years.” Ares brushes his nose against mine. “I couldn’t have dreamed up anyone better.” I tip my chin and kiss him then, but he’s not done, he pulls back, licking over his bottom lip and staring right into my eyes. “I let the darkness consume me. I was so angry and alone. I forgot what it felt like to have the warmth of the light on my face, my skin. You’re that light Laura. Without you, I’m just a shadow.”

A stupid tear leaks out of the corner of my eye before I can stop it. I wrap my arms around Ares’s neck and squeeze him to me with a strength that has me questioning if I’ve stolen another ability, this time from Milo.

I want to say something, anything, to tell him how much his words mean, to tell him how lost I was until they found me, but I can’t speak past the lump in my throat. I’m certain I would burst into tears if I tried. I shake my head, still clinging to him. “Ares.” His name is about all I manage, so instead, I release my hold on his neck. He leans back and before he can retreat again, I grab his face and kiss the hell out of him, hoping I can convey the words I can’t say out loud right now.

CHAPTER 14

*K*nowing our time alone won't last much longer, I run my hands over Ares's bare back, feeling the flex of muscles and the heat of his skin under my palms. I'm desperate to show him how much I need him. Without an ounce of urgency, he returns my kiss slow and drugging. Having removed his hand from my hip while I was hugging him, he's now leaning on his elbows, surrounding me. I have no doubt I'm as safe as I'll ever be, there's freedom in knowing Ares will always take care of me. I can just let myself go, I don't have to worry about being invisible with him because he's always seen me, will always see me.

I bring my knees up higher on his hips, it allows me to feel even more of him. Breaking the kiss to let out a low groan of desire my head falls back. Ares rocks against me, tightening his grip on my body even more. I don't know how it's possible to breathe, but I do, in shallow pants.

Ares buries his face in the crook of my neck, his breath matching mine. I turn my face, and my lips find Ares's shoulder. My hands move down to the waistband of his pants, I try to push them down, but I can't get them past his butt. With a growl of frustration, I bite his shoulder. Ares's head jerks back, and he rocks his hips against me harder.

If I don't already know he doesn't mind me biting him I would worry, his eyes are still closed and his chin is still tipped up. When he looks back down at me, his eyes are barely slits. The room darkens so much that even with my extend vision I can't see anything but him. Shadows cling to him, reaching out and dancing on my skin, only they feel solid, like icy fingers curling around my overheated flesh. The sensation is almost too much.

Ares pulls back to kneel between my legs, I miss the heat of his real touch

instantly. A shiver works its way over my body and when I breathe out, my breath fogs. Ares's hands go to my hips, his eyes steady on mine, waiting for permission.

I clench my teeth to keep them from chattering but tell him, "Yes." Heat uncoils in my lower stomach, unfurrowing and stretching out to warm me. Ares skates his fingers down my body, over my nipples, and dragging his gaze with his touch. When he reaches for my leggings, he looks up at me again, watching me as he folds his fingers under the waistband. I lift my hips from the mattress, showing him it's exactly what I want.

Unaware or unbothered by the frigid temperature change, Ares slowly pulls my leggings off, leaving me in lacy black panties. His eyes scan over me several times like needs to see every inch of me.

His tongue makes a lazy lap over his top lip, before he bites his bottom lip. Ares lets out a shaky breath and brings his left hand up to his mouth. I see the tip of his tongue peek out and he delivers a long lick up the side of his middle finger and around the tip, before immediately placing it on my stomach and tracing a circle around my belly button. I suck in a startled breath. The sensation has me trying to squeeze my thighs together and tighten my muscles.

Holy hell, I felt that in places he hasn't even touched yet. I squirm under his gaze. His eyes jump up to mine, and I bite the corner of my lip and look down at his pants, I can see the outline of his erection. I swallow, thinking that can't be comfortable, we should definitely do something about that.

With slow, deliberate movements, Ares reaches for his belt. I sit up with my hands already reaching for his. Gazing into his eyes, I place my hands on the center of his belt. He draws in a quick breath and his chest expands, not releasing it. I slip the leather free from the loop of his pants, my eyes still on his, and tug. I have to look down to unclasp it, but only for a second. He lets out a shallow exhale when I do.

I don't stop there, inching my fingers into his waistband I expect to find a button, but the flap is smooth. Noticing my confusion, Ares reaches down and releases the clasp, and I bat his hands away again and pull down the zipper. I shiver as a wave of icy air stirs my long hair. Ares's pants fall a few inches and he pushes them down his thighs, lifting each knee to get them the rest of the way off.

My eyes immediately go to the black swirl design that marks him as

mine. My fingers twitch, itching to see the entire mark, it's half covered by tight, black boxer briefs. Ares lowers his bottom to the bed, his knees spreading wide, and crooks his finger at me, beckoning me forward.

Rearranging my legs, I crawl toward him, closing the small distance between us. Ever aware of the passing time I settle my body against his, wrapping my arms around his neck and putting my mouth near his ear.

Ares's hands fall to my hips, his fingers biting in. I stifle a groan, he may be causing the icy temperature in the room, but his body is warm and solid under mine. My nipples drag against his skin as I snuggle in, trying to get even closer. Ares is rigid, barely even moving as he draws in each breath. Keeping my hand on the back of his neck I lean back to see his face, his jaw is taut, his brows are drawn down, and a heavy look of concentration covers his features.

"Are you okay?" My whispered words are spoken with a misty fog. His eyes narrow and he looks around, noticing the utter darkness of the room and the chilly temperature for the first time. Sensing his confusion, I place my hand on his jaw, drawing his attention back to me. "What's wrong?"

"This... I've never... I didn't realize," he stumbles, sounding apologetic. "I'm a little overwhelmed," he admits, watching my lips.

"You mean you don't always turn the room into an ice cave when you...?" I bite the corner of my lip and leave the suggestive words hanging, hoping it will lighten the mood.

"You aren't like anything I've ever experienced." Ares places his hand on my lower back and leans over, so he is holding me. "I can feel you on my skin." His eyes close as if he's focusing on the sensation. "Even when you aren't touching me." Prowling over me, he lays me down until my back hits the mattress.

"I'm trying not to let myself go," he breathes, rolling his hips against mine. Holy hell, the difference in feeling with his pants off is night and day. I can feel him between my legs, my panties a barely there barrier.

"I want you to let go." My fingernails dig into his lower back, and I raise my hips off the bed to get that closeness back when he tries to retreat.

"I have no idea what could happen, I'm not sure we're even on the same plane of existence right now."

"You're thinking way too much Ares. You're mine, I was made for you." I don't care if we're on the fucking moon. All I know is I need him. There's no room for questions. "Love me."

Ares's lips crash to mine, any self-control he might have been clinging to is gone. The cold intensifies, but he's here with me, and the fire inside me is enough to burn us both up. Ares makes a fist over my hip, gathering the lacy material of my panties, and they grow tight before I hear the fabric tear and they immediately loosen.

He rocks against me, and I tighten my knees over his hips while he uses his other hand to pull off what's left of my undies. "We need a condom." Ares almost whimpers at my words, his forehead dropping to my collarbone. His lips and tongue trace all over my chest like he can't help himself. I push my hands on his shoulders, and repeat, "Condom?"

He makes his way a little farther down until he's level with my breast. He places a warm open mouth kiss right over my nipple. His tongue swirling around the tip before he sucks me into his mouth. My back rises clear off the bed, my hands threading into his hair, digging in. He makes a low sound that vibrates across my skin. The muscles low in my belly clench, needing something more.

I cry out when I feel the blunt edges of his teeth on my hardened nipple, it's never enough to hurt, but damn does it make me crave him even more. When I think I can't handle another second, he switches sides, his free hand going to the breast his lips just left to massage as he tortures the other side with his mouth.

My hips are rocking against him, but it doesn't offer much relief, I have the weight of his body, not the length of him, and that's what I really need. Ares releases me from his mouth, both hands moving to massage and pinch my nipples as he slides even lower on my stomach. He kisses my navel and right beneath. I suck in a breath, the heat of his lips almost too much.

Grasping my thighs as he rises, I watch him move toward the closet. He's only gone a second before he returns, with a small gold square in his hand. He tosses it on the bed, his hands going to his boxers, lowering them inch by inch. I'm transfixed. I can't decide if I want to see his mark, or the rest of him. Thankfully, I don't really have to choose, because once the material slides down his legs, I can see his entire identifying mark. It curls over the indents of his lower abdominals, almost to the very top of his thigh.

I swallow as I get a glimpse of the rest of him. I'm not an idiot, I know what a penis looks like. I mean, I've had health class and read books that have described it, but I've never really seen one. It's not like I had access to all the porn sites the kids at school talked about, so seeing Ares fully nude is

a little intimidating.

His hand comes up and he closes his fingers around his erection near the base. He has a small, dark patch of hair that leads up to a thin trail to his navel. From there it's dappled up his abs before spreading out over his pectorals. My eyes are drawn back down to his hand and I watch, fascinated, as he does one lazy stroke from root to tip. "If you keep looking at me like that, *Cara*, I might not last very long." Ares's voice is husky, which only serves to excite me more.

Releasing himself, he kneels on the bed and stalks closer to me. His shoulders rolling with each movement as he nears. I fall back against the bed, expecting him climb over me. His eyes scan my body, apparently just as eager to see all of me as I was to see him. His eyes close and he licks over his lips. "Yup, gonna be over real quick," he mutters, almost to himself.

Ares kneels near my feet, sitting back on his heels, and his erection is standing out with a slight curve near the tip. I've read so many descriptions about what it feels like, velvet over steel, hard but smooth. I'm more than eager to see if any of those really fit. While I'm looking at him, it jerks like it was pulled by a string and Ares makes a low sound. My eyes jump up to his as he grabs hold of my foot. "What's it feel like?" I bite the corner of my lip, feeling silly I'm asking that question right now.

"A little too good, considering you're only looking at me." Ares slides my foot to the side, opening my legs a little.

"No, I mean when you touch it."

"I'd imagine it feels about the same as it feels when you touch yourself." Ares pushes my other foot to the side making room so he can crawl between my legs. "Good, but nothing like this. Just the way you're looking at me has me about to explode."

I shake my head, he's still not understanding. "I want to know how your skin feels, how hard you are, is it like velvet?"

Ares freezes, his head lowering on his neck so I can no longer see his face. "Jesus Christ."

I roll my lips behind my teeth, guessing I should have left the question for later. I can be so awkward. "Sorry, I'll shut up."

In a flash Ares dips his head and bites the inside of my thigh. I yelp in surprise, going up on my elbows I narrow my eyes at him. "Don't talk like that," he almost growls. "You can say whatever the fuck you want, ask me anything you want. Hell, I'll roll over and you can run a fucking scientific

experiment, but once you get your hands on me, I can't guarantee I won't start the party before we're both ready. You know what I'm saying?"

"You're going to masturbate?"

Ares lets out a long breath of air, lowering his chest to the mattress and look up at me from between my legs. "No, I mean if you touch me, I'll probably come, and I'd rather wait until I can do that with you."

I nod, thinking I'd rather do that with him too, and it's a little weird having this conversation with his face twelve inches away from my center. "Okay, let's do that together," I add quickly. Now that I'm not pre-occupied with thoughts of touching him, I feel a little self-conscious about where he is.

A wide grin lifts his lips. Ares inches a little higher as he prowls up my body, and I feel the brush of his chest against my thighs. I close my eyes and let my head fall to the bed. One touch and I'm too lost to care, the need that was riding me before he got up to get the condom is back.

I reach down to grab his shoulders, wanting his lips again. Instead, Ares drops an open mouth kiss over my hip, way south of my belly button. My lips fall open as my neck arches. I don't know how I can feel his kiss, in two places, but it definitely echoes between my legs.

I feel the stubble on his chin graze over my sensitive skin, he's still kissing me, but he's moving from my hip to the center of my stomach. I suck in a breath, unable to even exhale when his chin rasps across my small patch of pubic hair.

Ares makes a sound deep in his chest. "Can I kiss you Laura?"

I answer without a thought. "Always, Ares."

His head dips even lower and I feel the heat of his mouth as he leans in and delivers one long lick up my center. My back comes off the bed completely. Holy hell, I had no idea he would kiss me there. Ares's hand comes up, and he slides it under my butt, pulling me closer when I would have inched away. Without giving me a chance to recover, he goes right back, this time his tongue stops near my clitoris and he flicks back and forth. I plant my feet on the bed and a low moan escapes me.

I reach down and grab a handful of his hair intending to pull him up, this feels damn good, but it's almost overwhelming. I don't feel like I have control over my body. Ares takes me tugging on his hair as an encouragement and licks me again, and this time when he reaches my clit, he applies some kind of pressure that has my legs shaking and a whimper

leaving my lips. I tighten my knees and thighs around his head and shoulders. It's too much. "Ares." His name isn't more than a whisper, and he looks up at me, his eyes hooded with a feral gleam. I shake my head no in denial and reach for him. Ares pulls his hand out from under me and my bottom hits the bed. I let my eyes fall closed and relax as he slides his body against mine.

"You want to stop, did I do something wrong, hurt you?" He brushes hair away from my face, his voice is full of worry.

I open my eyes. "No, you didn't hurt me." I cradle his jaw in my hand. "I felt like I was losing control."

Ares's eyes soften, he kisses the corner of my lips and he smells a little musky, like me.

"Do you like that, kissing me there?" I can't help the question that pops out. I've been so alone for so long. Now that I have him and the others to talk to, sometimes I don't hold back. I can't imagine he'd get anything out of it.

Ares's body tightens over mine, his hands sliding under my back. "Fuck yes," he breathes into my ear. "Your scent all over me, the way you taste, the way you feel." His hips rock against the bed. I feel his abdominal muscles contract between my legs.

I turn my face so I can meet his lips, and Ares kisses me hungrily for several long minutes. I reach to the side of the bed where I know the condom is and search with my fingers. When my hand closes over the foil packet, I bring it over and break the kiss. "Should we put this on now?" I'm about as ready as I will ever be, if he keeps kissing me and touching my nipples, I think I'll come undone just from that.

Ares moves to take the package from my hand, but I pull it back. "Can I do it? I know how, we had to practice on a banana in class."

Ares lets out a low chuckle, his eyes dancing like I've never seen before. With a smirk on his lips, he lifts up so he's on his hands and knees and rolls over onto his back. He folds his arms behind his head and looks down at his erection. "Anything you want."

I bite the corner of my lips and tear the package open. The rubber inside kinda stinks, and it's super slimy. I pinch the tip and pull it free from the wrapper. I focus on Ares, excited I'm going to touch him.

Going up on my knees I shimmy over to him. He licks his bottom lip as his eyes scan over me. I touch his hip, swirling my empty hand over our mark and his penis jumps. Ares's mouth falls a little slack, and he tips his head back. But he snaps it back up, his eyes opening like he can't bear to look

away from me.

I guide my fingers to his short crisp hairs letting my nails drag over his pubic area. Another jerk, this time his hips rotate a little too. Fascinated with the blunt head, I see a tiny drop of fluid near the tip. Using my thumb, I touch it, finding it slightly sticky but warm. “Oh, fuck,” Ares curses, his head fall back again.

I pull my hand away, and his chest is heaving up and down, and I can see the flutter of his pulse in his neck with his head thrown back. He’s excited. Emboldened, I reach for him and wrap my fingers around his shaft. My thumb goes back to the slit as I use it to smear the little bit of moisture that’s left over his tip.

Ares grunts, and returns to watching me, his eyes a wide sea of black staring down at me. I move my hand up and down much like he did earlier, watching his face for a reaction.

He doesn’t disappoint. A frown mars his gorgeous features as he bites his bottom lip. He’s completely at my mercy. Ares, the most powerful and in control person I’ve ever met, is utterly open and vulnerable to me.

“Should I kiss you here?” My voice is husky, I barely recognize it. If I thought his eyes were wide before then I was wrong, a blast of icy air stirs my hair.

“I can’t fucking believe I’m going to say this, but how about we save that for another day?”

I like how powerful I feel, like that he’s letting me take the lead, even if it’s only perceived. “Just one little kiss?”

Ares’s eyes roll back in his head as his hips roll again. I take that as all the acceptance I need. Leaning down, I place a soft kiss right where the tip meets the shaft, under the slit. At the last second before I pull away, I deliver one small lick, wetting him.

Ares’s hips buck off the bed, and his eyes narrow on me, telling me that at some point he will get retribution.

I wisely decide I’ve played with him long enough. Holding the tip of the condom, I slide it down his length, finding the velvet over steel analogy to be apt. Ares’s hands join mine when I struggle to get it all the way down, the condom doesn’t reach his root, but it covers the important bit.

Ares grasps my arm and pulls me closer. “Come here,” he whispers, when I lean in close enough to kiss him. He taps the side of my leg and then taps the other side of the bed. He’s still in the somewhat reclined position as

before, propped up on the pillows of the bed.

I straddle his hips, being careful not to knee him as I do. I settle back on his thighs, his penis jutting up between us. Ares moves up into a sitting position and wraps his hand around the back of my neck. Instead of kissing me, he places his forehead on mine and takes several deep breaths.

I drape my hand over his forearm, tying us even closer together. “Are you sure you’re ready?” I don’t answer. Instead, I place my lips over his and show him I don’t have any doubts.

Not breaking the kiss, Ares guides me backward until he’s over me again and between my legs. One hand goes to my center and he runs his fingers up and down a few times, and once his fingers are coated in my wetness, he sinks one inside me.

I expect an uncomfortable pang, but it only feels a little foreign. My muscles tighten anyway with the intrusion. He works his finger in and out a few times until my hips start to follow his movements, and that’s when he adds the tip of another finger. I inhale, feeling a little pinch, but still expecting it to be much worse, does this mean I’m not a virgin anymore?

Again, he continues with the sweet, soft kisses, and sliding his fingers in and out of me. When my muscles tighten because he pushes a little higher, he adds his thumb to the mix, circling my clit with his fingers still inside me.

My hips rotate and lift, chasing him. Ares removes his hand and I make a sound of protest, I was just starting to really like that. He breaks the kiss and pushes up on one arm, looking down at me. Using the same hand he was touching me with, he takes a hold of himself and adjusts so he’s right at my entrance. Not taking his eyes off mine, he says, “This might hurt a little.” He winces like it might be more than a little. “I wish I could take the pain for you. I promise to never take what you’re giving me for granted.”

I nod and bite my lip. So it does get worse. My muscles tighten before he even enters me. Instead of pushing right in, he runs the tip up and down over me a few times, stopping and focusing on my clitoris. I relax, melting into the sheets with him over me. That’s when he lines himself up and rocks forward. At first it’s the same foreign feeling from before, maybe a little more of a pinch, but as he continues to rock the burning starts.

My face must tell him I’m hurting, because I’m being very careful not to utter a word. Ares makes a sound of distress, his eyes and mouth turning down at the sides. “I’m so sorry Laura.” Then he thrusts forward. The slight burn intensifies, stealing my breath, and I can’t keep in the whimper. “Ouch.”

I know my face is scrunched up in pain, but I can't help it.

Ares doesn't move a muscle. His hips are locked against mine, his lower body frozen. He dips his head and kisses next to my eye, near my temple. "So sorry, sorry, sorry," he mutters between little kisses on my cheek and ear.

I blow out a breath and feel the sting again. Knowing he can't see me I let my eyes fall closed and grit my teeth. It's not horrible, but it sure as shit is unfucking comfortable.

Knowing he hasn't finished yet is a little worrying. I want it to at least be good for one of us, but I'm not looking forward to that sharp pain again either.

Ares is still whispering his apology when I run my hand down his back. A little of the cold from the room has settled into my bones, making me feel brittle. I need his heat back; I need him to make this better for both of us. I don't know how.

Thoughts of inadequacy fill my head. How could I have ever thought I was good enough for him, for any of them? Tears begin to fall from my eyes and I turn my face away from Ares, so they won't land on him.

The shadows in the room deepen, brushing even closer to us on the bed. The air goes colder, as I feel the first tendrils of the smoky shades brushing against my skin. Ares, not noticing, stays frozen above me. "Ares." I shiver, my breath fogging.

"I'm so sorry," he mutters again. How can he not feel how cold the room is? My teeth start to chatter. I run my hands over his back again drawing his attention. "Ares, it's so cold," I stammer the words, sounding funny because I can't stop the quiver in my jaw.

He pulls back and looks down at me, his gaze then goes around the room. He mutters a curse and closes his eyes, his lips move as if he's reciting something, but I don't hear a word. The darkness recedes, pulling its icy fingers from around my legs. Ares's warmth immediately takes over, and his skin feels hot compared to moments before.

He touches his forehead to mine and nudges my nose with his. The overwhelming feeling of not being good enough begins to fade right along with the frigid temperatures. My mind clears and I realize not all the emotion welling up inside of me were my own. Some of that doubt and worry came directly from the man above me.

Ares is still deep inside me and the burn has turned into a low ache. My muscles relax, and the relief is almost instant. He blows out a heavy breath,

more of a gasp really, and runs his hand down my side. In the wake of his touch he leaves behind an echo of his caress. The shadows are back, but these are controlled by Ares. I don't know how I can feel them on my skin, but I do.

Eyes hooded, he leans in and gives me a simple brush of his lips, but it feels like he's coming back to me. My short nails score his back, I don't want him retreating from me again. "Are you okay?" I ask between kisses.

His hand cups my breast as an answer, his thumb teasing back and forth over the peak. My inner muscles clench again, but this time the pain is absent. Ares pulls out of me slowly and rocks back in, his hips pushing against mine. "Oh." The surprised sound comes from me.

Pushing up with one arm, so only our lower bodies are connected, he looks down at me, his eyes possessive as he watches where we're joined. His hips roll as he pushes forward. His eyes falling closed as his mouth drops open. This is what I needed from him, Ares to let himself go, to bring both of us to where we need to be.

I have no idea what came over him a few moments ago, but I intend to ask him about it, just not right now.

Ares takes his hand from my breast, and bringing it up to his mouth, he places his thumb between his lips. When he pulls it free, it's wet. Not wasting a second, he glides his hand between us, placing his damp thumb right against my clit. I still feel full, but the delicious pressure on my clit takes the slight pain and turns it into something more. My hips begin to rock, searching. Dropping back down on his elbow, Ares crashes his lips to mine. All thoughts of doubt, and worry are erased as he moans into my mouth. "So close, please," he pleads. I nod, agreeing. I am really close, that feeling of losing control settles lower in my stomach. I pull away from Ares, breaking the kiss. His lips go to my neck licking and sucking.

I bite his shoulder as the first wave of an orgasm crashes over me. His head tips back and he lets out a long, low groan, his hips still pushing against mine. The euphoric feeling falls away much quicker than any other time I've experienced an orgasm, leaving me feeling a little sore. Ares shudders above me, his moans of pleasure give me a secret satisfaction.

He leans down and places several worshiping kisses on my lips, and every time I think me might pull away he dips back for another long, languid kiss. Ares rolls over onto his side, he pulls me with him to lie on his chest, his body slipping from mine as he does. I shudder, not enjoying the feeling.

Placing a kiss at my temple, he murmurs, “Are you okay?”

I give the question some thought before answering. “I’m a little sore,” I tell him honestly, squeezing my thighs together. My legs feel a little like jelly, but a smile blooms on my lips. The hard part is over. From everything I’ve read or heard from listening to the girls talk at school, it shouldn’t hurt like that again. If Ares could make my first time so good, how much better could it get?

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” I trace my finger over his chest, wondering what he might say.

Ares blows out a long breath. He turns and scoots down, so we’re face to face. Grabbing my hands between us, he kisses the tips of my fingers, not looking at me. “This isn’t the right time to talk to you about this, but I need to be honest with you.” His words have me holding my breath, what could he possibly have to tell me?

“I’ve never done that.” I jerk back and glare at him, knowing I must have misheard him. He understands my confusion and amends, “Been with a virgin.” I let out my breath. “I didn’t know what to expect, but I hurt you.” He cuddles his face in closer to mine, giving the tip of my nose a kiss. “I never want to hurt you.” Ares wraps his hand under my hair and around my neck.

“I knew it would hurt silly, it was how you were after that freaked me out.” Ares reaches down and snags the black comforter from the end of the bed, and slides it over both of us.

“Oh, that.” He tries to sound light and airy, but fails.

“Yeah, that.” I place my finger under his chin to make him look at me. “Talk to me.” I search his eyes, the tawny brown is present and his pupils are small discs of black.

“I told you I was like a shifter too, but that I didn’t really change forms. Well, that’s kind of true. I don’t really change forms, but sometimes it’s like the shadows are sentient. Like they aren’t just a part of me but are something else,” he confesses, watching my face for my reaction.

I lick my lips, thinking about what he said. “So, it’s someone else controlling the shadows?”

Ares shakes his head immediately. “No, it’s me. A dark part of myself.”

“It looked like you were talking to someone,” I insist.

His brow furrows. “Not like what you’re thinking, it freaked me out that I hurt you, I lost control of my powers, didn’t even realize I was influencing

both of us. There was a part of me that was aware, that darker part of me, but instead of reining the powers in, it was like he was pulling all the energy from the room to try to be there for you.”

“You keep talking about him like he’s someone else, but saying he’s not.” I give him the side-eye, is he keeping something from me?

“I can’t explain it, it’s a part of me. The same way that Dante is the tiger, but this part of me doesn’t have a form. It’s all instinct and power,” he promises, his words pleading with me to understand.

I settle myself in closer and tuck my head under his chin. I don’t quite understand, but I know through the connection of our bond he’s not lying to me. Ares wraps his arms around me and kisses the top of my head. The heavy feeling of worry lessens as I breathe in his scent and feel his warmth against me. My eyes grow weighty, but I know I need to get up and shower. It’s been well over an hour since we disappeared, I can’t believe no one has come looking for us.

“I need to get up.” I yawn around the words.

“No, you don’t. I’ll text them and tell them you fell asleep.” Ares’s voice is just as sleepy as mine, maybe more so.

“We can’t do that, we’re supposed to be talking about the party.” I don’t have it in me to call it a ceremony.

Ares grumbles and flops his arm out to the side. “You get up first.”

“No, you get up first.”

“You’re laying on me,” he splutters, sounding indignant.

“Well, then move me.”

“I don’t want to.” He actually pouts.

I groan but push off his chest and look down at him. He looks adorable, eyes all soft and sleepy, hair a mess from my hands. A smile curves my lips. He’s mine, and nothing will ever change that.

“What’s so funny?” He returns my grin.

I lay my chin in his chest, still gazing up at him like a lovesick fool, but that’s exactly what I am. “I’m just happy, I love you.”

His eyes flare wide and he snags my arms, bringing me up to his face. “I love you too.”

CHAPTER 15

*A*fter a quick shower I head toward the kitchen, my hand tucked inside Ares's palm. The nerves I ignored earlier are back. What if someone says something about us being gone for so long? What if one of the guys realized what we were doing and gets mad? I shuffle my feet, debating if I should release his hand, but not wanting to lose the connection either.

I can hear them chatting before we get to the door, and Ares gives my hand a gentle squeeze but doesn't slow his pace. We round the doorway and a few heads turn in our direction. I scan the guys' faces, but none of them look irritated at our disappearance. Ollie lifts his hand in a wave. "Hey, come take a look at these." He doesn't miss a beat, acting as if I left ten minutes ago instead of the hour and a half we've really been gone.

I release Ares's hand and head over to Ollie. He's pointing at an open laptop on the island. Pulling back the empty chair next to him, I take a seat with my eyes glued to the screen. There's a list of several food options, everything from beef wellington to chicken caprice. In another column are several options for sides, such as risottos and a few I'm not even familiar with.

"What do you think, which ones sounds good?" Ollie grabs my hand and laces our fingers together under the counter. I'm so grateful for his easy acceptance, so I follow his lead and dive right into the project at hand.

"How many entrées are we picking?" I know from my experience working at restaurants that banquets always have more than one option for entrées.

"At least one protein from each category," Rosa answers, her voice light.

When I look up her eyes are on Ares and she has a wide smile on her lips. I look back at the laptop, a blush staining my cheeks.

The chair next to mine pulls back, and I know without looking it's Dante. He bumps his head against mine while taking the seat. I reach for him with my free hand once he's seated. I scan the list again. "I haven't tried very many of these, what do you guys think?" I look up and make sure Milo knows I'm including him. He's near his parents, and they take up entire sofa with him sitting on the arm.

He gives a lazy shrug, "I think we should just keep it simple. Chicken chevre, filet mignon, and lobster."

"We need a vegetarian option. And what about people who are allergic to shellfish, maybe we should add another fish option?" Rosa interjects.

"Why don't you just have them order from the full menu, every time we pick something you keep adding more anyway?" Dante retorts, his tone suggesting that this isn't the first time they've had this discussion.

"Two from each category, including vegetarian. The sides will be à la carte, with three salads and a dessert bar," Ares comments as he walks over to stand near the fireplace, where his fathers are both seated in the large chairs, with Rosa draped across Mal's lap.

"The full menu is an option too?" Linda adds, ignoring Ares and looking across at Carolyn on the couch opposite her.

"We will be here all night." Ollie drops his head on my shoulder in defeat.

"Two proteins from each, sides, and a dessert bar. Or I'll make it a buffet," Ares counters with a smug look on his face.

Rosa gasps, turning to glare at him. "Fine, let's talk flowers." She may have let Ares think he overrules her on the food, but I'm not so certain.

The debate goes on for another hour. Every decision from flowers and music to the color scheme is a battle of wills between all three mothers, who seem united, and the guys. Milo wants it simple, Ares just wants it over with if I had to guess, and Dante doesn't seem to have much of an opinion, leaving Ollie somewhere in the middle, wanting extravagance, but not to the extreme the moms want. I'm with Ares on this one. If we could skip it altogether, I'd be happy.

"Okay, it's settled then?" Dante slams the laptop closed and shoves it away from us. I glance over at the clock. It's just shy of ten o'clock, and we have school in the morning. I wish we had the entire week off for

Thanksgiving.

Ollie stands, running his hand over my shoulder as he heads over in his parents' direction. He leans down and places a kiss on his mother's upturned cheek. "I'm going to shower so I don't have to do it in the morning, night everybody."

Milo stands. "We should all go, we have school in the morning."

I couldn't agree more. I've been shifting my weight trying to get comfortable on this hard stool since I sat down. If it wasn't so late, I'd be searching out a tub for a long, hot bath. I'm sore in places I never knew could get sore.

I wince when I stand, and Ares catches the look. His eyes flash to Dante, then jerk over to me, telling him with his eyes to pay attention.

Dante rises and comes around the chairs to stand by my side, his nose flaring as he takes in my scent. I'm not sure how keen his nose is, but I would assume it's much stronger than mine.

"You guys go ahead, I'll catch up in a few." Ares nods his head in our direction, and Milo has joined us now. I give a small wave and plaster a smile on my face. It still feels weird that I'm going to be sleeping in their sons' rooms, and no one seems to mind.

Ollie guides us from the kitchen, and Dante has his arm around my waist like I need help standing. I don't, he's overreacting, but I like his closeness so I don't push him away. Our walk to the room is quiet, and now that I'm away from their parents the fatigue I felt earlier is setting in.

Milo pushes open the door, I don't waste a second shuffling over to the bed and climbing in. Ares changed the sheets while I was in the shower, but Dante pauses at the doorway, his head tilting to the side as his chest expands. His eyes land on me in the bed, I've already got the covers pulled up to my neck, and I can't meet his eyes, so I stare at his chin. If he didn't already know what was going while we were gone, he does now. He rolls his shoulders and neck, and his head lowers, making him seem more predatory as he steps over to the bed slowly.

Ollie, seeming to not notice, walks over to the closet then heads into the bathroom. "I won't be long if anyone else needs in." The door closes behind him before he even looks back in my direction.

Milo shuffles over to the closet and disappears behind the panel. Alone with Dante, my eyes return to him. He's standing beside the bed, his eyes on me. I swallow, wondering if he will say anything. Instead, he grabs the

bottom hem of his shirt and lifts it slowly. His abdominal muscles tighten, and his biceps bulge a little when he pulls it free. He doesn't move to get in bed and his eyes never leave mine. It's like he's putting himself on display for my inspection.

I raise the covers a little more, but I can't look away. Dante blinks at me, his eyelids heavy as he reaches down. He doesn't wear a belt, so his hand goes right for the button on his pants.

My eyes grow wide and I look over at the closet, Milo hasn't come out yet. Returning my gaze back to Dante, I watch as he loosens the button on his jeans. He's not wearing anything beneath. My face grows warm as I follow the dark patch of hair up his belly, until I meet his eyes. His pupils are dilated, the amber ring surrounding them glowing more orange than I've ever seen, outside of his animal form.

I was right to assume he was putting himself on display; I think this is his tiger offering himself up. The itching feeling I get under my skin when I feel his power too close rushes over me. I feel an ache in my mouth and my tongue instinctively runs along my front gums. I don't know what surprises me more, how pointy my canines have become, or the fact that I can feel the roughness of my own tongue.

Dante's head tilts again, and he lifts his chin, baring his neck to me, but his eyes are locked on mine. I feel my lip curl up as a low growl emanates from my chest. I sit up and the blankets fall into my lap. My shields are down. I'm so exhausted after the long day that I don't have enough energy to fight the demands of Dante's abilities as they crash into me.

I look at my body, aware of what's happening, but it's like I'm somehow witnessing it instead of experiencing it. Dante jerks his arm out behind him and my eyes, much more sensitive to movement, track it.

Milo is standing near the panel of the closet. My gaze focuses on him as he stands frozen with a bundle of clothes clutched against his wide chest. Another snarl leaves my lips, the predator inside me thinking he might go after my prey, Dante. Another jerk of Dante's hand and Milo retreats back into the closet. I know deep inside I would never hurt him, but I'm having a hard time reining in the beast inside me.

I dig my hands into the covers still over my lap, only to feel them shred around my fingernails. Lifting my arm, I see not only talon like claws extending from my fingertips, but black stripes slanting up my arms. A jolt of fear causes a whine to leave my chest. I'm frightened, but it's an emotion the

animal inside me doesn't understand. On some basic level she knows we're safe, that I'm with my mates, and the fear belongs to me, my human self. How much more will I change? Will I be able to come back? I look up at Dante again and the prickling feeling under my skin is gone. The desire to pin him to the mattress flares up inside of me.

Instead of pouncing on him, my body slinks up so I'm crawling on all fours to get closer to him. Dante doesn't move a muscle. His chin is still tipped in the air, the thick line of his neck exposed to my beast, and she likes it.

Once I reach the end of the bed, my face is level with his bare stomach. My tongue whips out lightning fast and laves Dante from his pubic bone up to his navel. His scent goes stronger, but he doesn't even breathe.

A muffled noise triggers my senses, my ear twitches. Keeping my face low, I snag Dante's jeans with my claws, trapping him. Angling my head, I look around him and see Milo disappearing into the bathroom with barely any sound. A snarl of satisfaction purrs from my chest, I'm alone with Dante.

Releasing his pants, the fabric falls away from his hip, leaving even more of him exposed from the torn material. I rise until I'm right in front of him, kneeling. A wave of pure contentment settles over me as I do. Mine.

I run my hands over his chest, careful, even though I'm so far gone, that I won't hurt him. My rough tongue swipes lazily up over chest until I reach his neck. I bury my face there, my vicious teeth, pointy enough to cut my own mouth, dragging over his shoulder.

When he doesn't make a sound or deny my touches, I rise until I'm standing on the bed and looking down at him. Dante's eyes meet mine and I don't see an ounce of fear, lust, maybe even a little respect, but not fear.

"Turn," I order, my words a growl. Ever so slowly he does as I asked, making sure not to make any sudden movements. As soon as the smooth lines of his back are exposed, a purr leaves my chest. He is mine to do with what I choose.

Dante shivers as my hands come up under his arms to wrap around his chest. Without any warning I latch on to the place where his shoulder meets his neck. My teeth sinking in enough so I taste his blood on my tongue, the abilities inside me flashing with so much power I see stars.

The bedroom door slams open and there stands a panting Ares, his eyes blown wide, fully black. I drag Dante even closer to me, not letting go of my

prey.

Weakly, Dante raises his arm to stave off his brother. Ares's shoulders fall, the perceived threat gone. Only I remain.

His acceptance allows the animal inside me to let go of the hold she has on me. She senses that Ares isn't a beast she wants to tussle with, she isn't eager for a fight, but she won't admit he would beat her either.

These thoughts, though my own, filter through my consciousness as if separate. Ares describing his dark self tickles my memory. My mouth aches again, this time it's sharp and quick. My teeth pull free from Dante's shoulder. I lap at the red smear left behind, my eyes locked on Ares. He places his hands deep into his pockets, watching me.

I have a second to look over his wrinkled shirt. As my beast recedes, she smiles in triumph. At my urging he put back on his mussed clothes from earlier, he didn't like it, but he did it for me. I thought it would look too obvious if we both went out in different clothes. She understands might isn't the only way to get what she wants. Giving a nod of respect in my direction, she curls around the power inside me that tastes of Dante.

I'm slow to let Dante go, and even though I'm fully myself again, I find it easier not to face him or Ares so I duck behind his shoulder. Thankfully Milo and Ollie stayed in the bathroom for most of the more violent aspects of my newest ability. I let my forehead fall to Dante's back. Ashamed that I let myself bite him, hurt him, in any way.

When I try to pull my hands free from his chest, I feel Dante's hands snap up to mine and hold them in place. He squeezes my fingers then spins to face me. I look down at my feet, curling my toes in the black blanket, noting that the stripes are gone from my skin, and my nails have returned to normal as well.

Dante wraps his arms around me, not giving me time to escape. I don't even hug him back, I don't deserve to. A knot forms in my throat. I can still taste the metallic tang of his blood in my mouth.

I stifle a sob and my shoulders jerk with the effort. How the hell will I ever be able to control that part of myself? I tuck my head under Dante's chin when I hear the snap of the door closing, I have no idea if Ares and the others are in the room or if they left us alone. Dante pulls his torso away from me, but I fight not to look at him.

"I can't... I am so sorry." I shake my head, I can't believe how I acted. If he would have done something like that to me when we met, I would have

run for the hills.

“Laura.” Dante’s deep voice curls around my name and the beast raises her head, I look up at him from under my lashes. His eyes are a little wild, like he can’t see enough of me as he gazes down at me. I smooth my cheek against his bare chest, liking the way I can smell myself on his skin.

His hands dig into my hips and he lifts me off the bed, and then sets my feet on the ground. He towers over me, his head bent so his forehead touches mine. “Don’t hide from me,” Dante pleads, his words a whispered rasp.

“I bit you,” I utter slowly, like there’s some way he doesn’t know what just happened.

“You didn’t hurt me.” I open my mouth to argue, but he stops me by placing his finger over my lips. “When you bit me, were you trying to hurt me?”

I shake my head in denial, before I even think about his question. None of it was to hurt him, show him he was mine, yes, but not hurt him.

“Look.” Dante bares the side of his neck and the bite that should still be fresh is sealed over, a couple of pink spots where my teeth punctured his flesh are all that remains.

I reach forward to run my finger over the spots, not trusting my eyes when only fading scars are visible. My brows furrow in confusion. Dante’s eyes close when I touch his skin. “Nothing you did was wrong sweetheart, but it was my fault.”

I snatch my hand away from Dante. How could he blame himself for what I did? He grabs my hand again, laying it over his chest, I can feel the heat of his skin under my palm, the rapid beat of his heart. “Let me explain,” he offers, crowding even closer to me.

When I don’t argue he continues, his head dipping low to whisper in my ear. “I knew you weren’t just taking a shower.” My body goes rigid at his words. “I thought I was under control, but then when we walked in this room, I could smell you.” I purse my lips, this isn’t something I want to talk about right now. “I knew I was baiting you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I could feel your abilities cresting when we would train, but you fought it.” I swallow, knowing he’s telling the truth. I did fight it, I didn’t want to deal with learning another ability. “I knew I could push you, speak to that part of you that you’ve been afraid to accept.”

A little guilt settles in my chest. I have been afraid of what I might turn

into. I want to make an excuse for myself, say it was only because we've been dealing with so much, but that's not the whole truth. So, I keep my mouth shut. I let the truth of his confession sink in. What he did wasn't right. I don't like that he pushed me into something I wasn't ready for.

I pull away from him, angry and hurt at myself and Dante. He lets me go, his arms falling to his side with a defeated slump. "I wasn't thinking clearly, it's not an excuse. I know I was wrong." Dante lowers his head and steps back, putting more distance between us.

An ache forms over my heart. I bring my hand up over my chest and rub, trying to ease the pang. I open my mouth to tell him it's okay, but I can't find the right words. Dante turns away from me, preparing to leave the room. He's putting more than physical distance between us.

"Dante?" His name is all I manage. Fear of rejection has my plea turning to ash on my tongue. He doesn't turn, but he looks over his shoulder at me. He doesn't say a word. "Are you leaving me?" Tears prick the corners of my eyes and the lump is back in my throat.

"I took something from you that you weren't ready to give. I don't deserve to be here with you. I'm an animal." His tone is flat. He says the words as if they are an eventuality that he's been fighting.

A fire sparks in my chest. "Do not walk out that door," I order, my voice hard. Dante turns to face me. His chin tipped up in defiance. I take a few steps, closing the distance between us. His eyes shift, going from a feigned indifference to something closer to hesitation.

"You pushed me. I wasn't ready. And that's not okay." He swallows, his eyes shuttering again. "But you know what would be worse?" He gives a barely discernable shake of his head in denial. "It would be much worse if you left because of it. I can handle a mistake, I know you weren't trying to hurt me." I use his own words on him, hoping he'll understand. It may upset me, but that doesn't mean I can't or don't want to forgive him. "What I can't handle is thinking you'll leave me every time we disagree or have an issue."

Another bob of his throat as he swallows. "I just wanted to give you some space. Let the others make you feel better."

"I don't want them to make me feel better. I want you to make me feel better." A little anger leaks into my voice.

Dante's shoulders slump even more and his head goes down, looking at his feet. After a few short seconds his chest expands, and he stands to his full height his eyes meeting mine. "I'm sorry I pushed you." He lets out another

deep breath. “Me leaving you isn’t something you have to worry about. Ever.”

I run my toe through the thick carpet. My insecurity that they might forget about me, leave me alone to deal with everything the way I always have, is still there. I know deep down it won’t happen, but it’s easy to fall back into those thoughts. Especially when I’m feeling vulnerable.

Dante takes a hesitant step in my direction, and when I don’t move, he takes another. I let him come to me. When he’s a hairsbreadth away, he reaches for me and folds me into his arms. I lay my head on his chest and wrap my arms around his waist. I don’t want to be upset, I’m too tired to be upset.

CHAPTER 16

Ollie taps my shoulder in math class. A grin widens my lips, but I ignore him. “Muenster,” he mock whispers. Half the class turns to look at him to see what he’s talking about. Glancing up at the teacher first to make sure she’s not watching, I turn to give him my attention.

Ollie bites the corner of his lip and I swear his eyes gleam. “Hi.”

A small snort leaves me. “Hi? That’s all?” Ollie hates to be ignored.

He leans forward so the desk tips. “Oh, I can do much better than just a hello, Muenster.” His voice holds a promise of more. A few whispers from the surrounding students kick up.

I don’t bother fighting my grin when I answer, “Oh, I know you can.”

Ollie lets his desk legs fall back to the floor, but he doesn’t look away from me. The teacher calls the class to attention. Even though I hate to, I turn to face the front of the room. “Listen, we still have today to get through. You have the rest of the week to fluff off, but not in my classroom.” She looks around, not focusing on anyone in particular as she delivers the threat.

I sigh and open my book, only a few more hours to go. Instead of poking me with his pen, I feel Ollie’s warmth seep into my back. I let out a low groan at how good it feels, relaxing my muscles.

I’m not looking forward to training tonight. Even though I slept like a rock last night, I can still feel the exhaustion from yesterday weighing on me. Not to mention I’m still a little sore in intimate areas too. Ollie’s heat fades away too soon, and I focus on the open textbook in front of me, might as well get this stuff done.

When the bell rings signaling the end of class, Ollie rumples my hair. I’ve been leaving it down more, instead of always having it in loose ponytails. I

narrow my eyes up at him, blowing the strands of hair he mussed out of my face. Unrepentant, he grabs my book bag before I can rise.

As we make our way over to the door I see some kids veering off to one side, Milo is waiting for us. I don't get much of a chance to see him throughout the day, other than lunch, so when he walks me to class it's always a nice surprise.

"You made it here quick," Ollie greets him.

Milo shrugs and looks around the busy halls, watching for something. "Want me to walk you?" he offers, once he's satisfied after looking around.

"Sure, I'll see you at lunch Ollie, be good."

He places his hand over his chest and gives me an endearing pout. "I'm always good." He can't even keep a straight face when he speaks. His lips tip up, but he covers it, trying to look stern. "I don't want any trouble from you two, no more PDA," he blurts loudly, catching everyone's attention. I roll my eyes and snag Milo's hand to pull him with me in the opposite direction.

Milo lets out a short, low chuckle. The mood between them has been so much better over the last day or two. Milo leaves me near the door to my next class, his fingers reaching up to brush my hair over my shoulder. "I'll see you soon," he promises, stepping in close to me. The small step feels bigger because it's Milo, he's always so careful to keep his distance. I now know it's his fear of unintentionally hurting someone that keeps him from getting too close.

Ignoring Ollie's warning I lean up, intending to kiss the corner of Milo's lips. But he turns into the kiss, surprising me again. "I'll be here after class," he tells me, then turns and disappears up the hallway.

"They pass her around like the whore she is." Delaney doesn't hide her scorn from me as she pushes past me into the classroom. Her words are true, but couldn't be further from reality. I walk into class with my shoulders back and head held high, knowing it's just her jealousy speaking. She would walk through fire to be in my position with any one of them, but I have all four.

The whispers die down when class starts. The teacher assigns two chapters to read over the break and tells us to get started, taking a seat behind the desk.

The hour goes by quickly, and anytime anyone tried to talk, the teacher shut it down quickly with a look. I don't think she wanted to be here today any more than the students did.

As promised, Milo is waiting in the hall for me when the bell rings. "How

do you always get out of class early?”

He maneuvers around a group of boys standing near a locker. “I usually just tell the teacher I need to talk to coach, or that I need to use the bathroom a few minutes before class gets over.”

“They buy it, every time?” I watch him navigate the halls, his eyes completely focused on the task.

“What are they going to do, tell me no, I can’t take a piss?” He glances over at me quickly then returns to watching the halls vigilantly.

Milo reaches the open double doors of the cafeteria—the noise is always near deafening—and we make our way over to our usual table. Ollie is already seated near the end. He looks up at our approach. “Did you pack anything?” he asks, sounding hopeful.

He knows I didn’t, I never do, I’ve gotten used to them always bringing my lunch. Milo urges me to the table with a hand on my lower back. “No, I’ll hit the line, get us all something. I don’t remember Dante grabbing anything either.”

“We could always go out and grab something?” That hopeful note is still in Ollie’s tone.

“I wanna come,” a light-haired girl next to Ollie pipes up. He glances at her and doesn’t respond.

Milo pulls his phone from his front pocket and checks the screen. “It’s already seven after, we might be late getting back,” he warns.

The girl next to Ollie assumes it’s for her, and replies, “I don’t even care, we can skip the rest of the day if you guys have a place we can go.” Her eyes run over Milo.

I sense Dante’s presence before he even enters the large room. He walks up next to me, standing a little closer than most would find normal. “What’s up?”

“Nobody packed lunch, we’re thinking of going off campus.” Ollie places his palms on the table and stands.

The girl and one of her friends follow suit. She peers around, looking at the guys like she’s expecting some kind of acknowledgement.

Dante shoves his hand in his front pocket and pulls out his keys, dangling them in the air. “We can call Ares and see if he wants to meet us at the diner?”

“If we do that, we won’t be coming back for the rest of the day,” Milo interjects, watching me for a reaction.

“It’s only a couple hours, and it’s right before break.” I glance between the three guys. I’d be more than happy to get the hell out of here, but the girl isn’t coming.

Ollie lets out a little whoop. “Let’s do this man.”

Looking unsure, the girl clears her throat. “So, can we come too?” She avoids looking at me.

“Sorry, family only.” Ollie bounces over to Milo, Dante, and I. The girl’s face falls, and she slides back to her seat. Her friend leans in close and they whisper a few words between themselves.

We exit the lunchroom as a group, there are a few aides and the lunch ladies, but no one questions where we’re going.

As we move through the hallway nearing the office, Milo tugs on my hand to stop me. “You guys go ahead. I’ll take Laura to the office and tell them I’m taking her home for the day. That way the school won’t call.”

“The automated service will probably still call,” Ollie comments, “but it’s not like you gave a real number so who cares. They won’t know.”

I squeeze Milo’s hand, appreciating his thoughtfulness. “As long as a real person isn’t calling, it shouldn’t matter,” I offer. Milo resumes his pace, keeping my hand in his.

I expect a teacher or someone to stop us when we reach the parking lot. I little nervous thrill has me looking over my shoulder.

“Hey, we got out early. Want to grab lunch?” Dante has his phone at his ear as he opens the driver’s side door. “Someone said the diner, but we can go anywhere.” He settles behind the seat, putting the key into the ignition but not starting the car. After a brief silence he says, “We’re just leaving school, it’ll take us about twenty minutes to get there.”

We all pile in after him, Ollie and me in the back with Milo in the front. “Where are we going?” Ollie whispers near Dante’s shoulder.

“All right, we’ll be there soon.” Dante pulls the phone away, hitting the end button. “Ares is in Monroe. He went to sign the papers for the house, he said we can meet him there.”

“That fast?” I look around at the guys.

Ollie settles back into the seat. “When you’re motivated, and have money, almost anything is possible.” Dumbfounded, I shake my head.



Dante parks his car in the outer lot of a fancy Japanese restaurant. We're near the big mall we went to over the weekend. There are several nice restaurants and hotels lining the narrow road that leads to the shopping mall.

I get out of the back using Milo's hand and stretch my back. "I never looked upstairs at the house, is there a bathtub?" I direct my question to Ollie, he was all over that house, up and down.

"Just a standard old thing, nothing special." I purse my lips. A tub is the one thing Ares's bathroom is seriously lacking. Baths aren't something I got very often using camp showers most of my life. Even a standard tub, whatever that is, I'm sure will be fine.

We walk up to a tall set of gold double doors, where Milo and Dante each grab a handle as Ollie tucks my hand over his elbow. He gives the guys a cheeky bow and escorts me through the doors. We're greeted by a young man in dark pants and a crisp, button-down white shirt. "Do you have a reservation?"

"We're meeting someone," Milo answers. "Costa," he adds.

The young man bounces his head and waves his arm out. "Right this way, please."

Somehow, I get pushed to the front of the group to trail after the fast-footed host. I look back at the guys making sure they're keeping up. He leads us to a sectioned off room that has a large silver grill in the center. Ares is seated on a stool near a wooden counter that runs around the cooktop. A lightness fills my steps as we near, until he turns and I see who's next to him—Mia.

I falter, not expecting to see her here. It's not like I don't know they still work together, but having her away from the house has been like out of sight, out of mind. He stands when he sees me, moving off the stool to meet me at the room's entrance.

Ares bends and places his lips on mine for a brief moment. I close my eyes and let his scent and warmth enfold me.

When Ares pulls away, I plaster a smile on my lips and growl through my teeth so only he can hear me, "A little warning would have been nice."

Ares's pupils expand. "And chance not getting to spend a few extra stolen

moments with you?” He makes a tsking sound, like I’ve underestimated him. I narrow my eyes and snap my teeth together, I may have felt bad for biting Dante, but I don’t have the same reservation when it comes to Ares, he likes it too much.

The grin that falls over his face is simply wicked, leaning in close, he mutters near my ear, “Anytime sweetheart.”

The host waits until Ares pulls away from me again and shakes hands with Dante—it’s a more formal greeting than they usually share—before asking, “Will anyone else be joining you, Mr. Costa?”

“No, this is us,” Ares answers, the heat that was in his tone moments ago, gone.

“If there isn’t anything else.” The young man bows before turning on his heel and hustling away.

We’re all just standing in the doorway. I’m not sure if the awkward tension means Dante knew Mia was here, and that’s why they were so slow to join us, or if it came as a surprise to them as well.

Ares moves first, snagging my hand to tow me along with him. He hesitates at the stools, not sure where to put himself, or me. He settles on reclaiming his seat, after pulling out the stool next to him for me while keeping himself between Mia and me.

“You guys decided to get out a little early?” Mia waves a tiny porcelain cup at the guys and her smile droops.

“What’s a few hours, right?” Ollie answers her easily.

“A few hours.” Mia shakes her head and tips back the small cup, taking it like a shot. My brow tightens, is she drinking? I assumed it was tea.

A man in a tall, white hat enters from a side door and moves behind the grill. I could already feel the heat, but he adjusts something beneath the counter and a blast of warm air hits me.

“Chef’s table,” the man states with a heavy accent. Ares gives a nod of understanding. Moments later a thin woman walks out holding a large silver tray aloft. She carefully places it on a waiting stand near the chef’s hip. He looks it over and grabs a few items after squirting oil on the grill. His movements are brisk, but he adds flare, cracking an egg over a steel rod and flipping a few shrimp in our direction once they’re seared on the grill. Dante reaches out and captured a piece right before Ollie’s open mouth, which makes him pout.

The chef makes a little volcano out of thick white onions, flames

billowing out of the top, while using his other hand to cook small bites of meats. The same woman who carried the tray returns, holding two deep dishes covered with dome lids. I can see the steam wafting out of the little hole they slot the spoon into, and opening it for our inspection, she reveals steamed rice. Again, Ares nods and she leaves.

Focusing more on cooking instead of entertaining, the chef places several meats and seafoods all from different containers on the grill, preparing our lunch. I have no idea what most of it is beyond beef, chicken, and fish, but I try almost everything that gets put on my plate. Finally, I wave him away when he keeps trying to add more. I place a hand low my belly and lean over onto Ollie's shoulder.

Once he's finished eating, Ares unfolds a black linen napkin he has over his thigh and wipes the corners of his lips and tosses it to the table. "I'm going to the restroom, be right back." He drops a kiss to my temple and heads out the door.

Mia, who has been uncharacteristically quiet, chooses now to lean over and acknowledge my existence. She hasn't so much as looked at me this entire time, seeming way more interested in refilling her little cup from a small bottle of dark liquid.

"Got to see the love nest." Her eyes are a little glazed, but otherwise she looks like her normal put together self. Every hair is in place with light makeup, and a fitted cream sweater with navy blue trousers. I don't comment on her description of our house, she can call it our fuck pad for all I care.

"It's not much now, but it'll be amazing once we're through with it," Ollie answers her excitedly.

She makes a thick sound in her throat and rolls her eyes. "It was a dump, Ares hates it." That gets my attention.

"Mia, your petty, isn't pretty." Ollie raises his brows and slides his hand over my back. I see Dante's dark head lean in to get a better look at our end of the table. His eyes flash orange, it calls to the beast inside me.

I make fists with my hands and smother the itching under my skin. I cannot grow talons and black tiger stripes in a restaurant. I look away from Dante and focus on the heat rising off the grill until I feel more in control.

"You think he'll be happy there, in a little ranch on a mountain? He's used to living in the city, having someplace to go and something to do when he can't sleep and is restless." She slurs a few of her words.

"He doesn't need the distraction now, he sleeps," I tell her.

Mia laughs, finding my statement funny. “Ares never sleeps, he stays up for days at a time, and only crashes when his body demands it.”

“Not anymore. I know, he sleeps next to me every night.” I don’t mean for my words to come out like barbs, but they do.

“You fucking wish.” She glares at me, knocking back another shot.

I take a good long look at her. There are circles under her eyes that the makeup can’t hide, and her eyes are dull with a sheen of alcohol making her look close to tears. She’s lashing out, and of course I would be the one to receive it.

I turn away from her, not willing to give her the fight she wants. She’s insignificant. I know that hurts, I’ve been inconsequential my entire life until now. She makes that sound in her throat again, a cross between snorting and laughing, but it sounds like she might throw up too. She’s pretending that I don’t matter, and that I’m lying about Ares sleeping, but I don’t need to. It’s the truth.

I feel her as she leans in and tries to whisper, but it comes out louder than intended. “Just wait, he’ll come looking for me, he always does. I’m the only one who really accepts him for what he is.”

“And what is that?” I don’t turn to look at her, but I wait for her answer.

“He’s the boogiemán.” She groans like she’s making scary noises to a child.

I turn to face her, calling all the shadows in the room to me, and it’s as if someone pulled the shades and the sun is hidden. If she thinks he’s the boogiemán, I’m going to show her who she should really fear.

Mia jerks back from me, her eyes wide as she stumbles to get out of the stool and away from me. “You’re a freak too,” she accuses. I don’t even move, I just stare at her. I can feel the icy tendrils of shadows dancing over my skin. I could get in her head, make her see things that aren’t even there, the path is so clear, but I don’t.

Someone touches the back of my neck and in my ear, Ares whispers, “You don’t need to do this, *Cara*.”

“She said you were the boogiemán, I don’t like her talking about you like that.” I tilt my head again, staring at Mia. She closes her eyes as if that will make me disappear.

“Deep down she’s always been afraid of me, she could never understand us, *Cara*, come back.”

I feel contrite the moment I release the darkness. Thank God we’re alone

in this room. Ares doesn't shy away from me, doesn't even look bothered that I went all dark while we were eating lunch.

I glance over at the others, and Ollie lifts a shrimp off his plate and salutes me with it before dropping it in his mouth. "I'm stuffed, when can we get in the house?"

CHAPTER 17

“*T*hey have until Thursday to get everything out.”

“Thursday?” Ollie whines “Can’t you pay someone to move everything out today?” The fact that they are acting like everything is completely normal isn’t lost on me. I glance quickly at Mia who’s over in the corner of the room, her back to me. Ares walks over to his stool and leans his hands on the back, blocking her from my view.

“The owners aren’t living there so we can go over and have another look around, but the moving company wasn’t available until tomorrow,” Ares offers as a concession.

Dante tips his head in Mia’s direction, his eyes narrowed at her back. “What about her?”

“I’ll call her a car, I was just going to let her drive mine back and ride with you guys, but I can see that wasn’t a well thought out plan.”

I look down at my hands and see my trembling fingers. My insides are suffering the same fate. Milo places his heavy palm on my shoulder. I glance up at him, wondering when he moved over to my side and what he thinks of me now. Out of all of them, Milo goes out of his way to make sure he never hurts anyone, and he watched me use my ability to scare Mia. It doesn’t matter that I did it because I was protecting Ares, as stupid as I know that is. I still did it, would do it again if I ever thought someone threatened any one of them.

Milo gazes at the other side of the room, watching Mia instead of me. I’ve always thought he had a fondness for her. I almost shrink away from his touch but hold my ground. He may not like what I did, but I can’t even make a promise not to do it again. He’ll either accept me for who and what I am, or

he won't.

His hand slides over my upper back in a soothing motion. A tiny trickle of hope he isn't appalled by my behavior has me closing my eyes in relief. I know I just can't lose my shit in public. I know I probably overreacted, but I don't regret it.

I look up to see Ares returning to the secluded room. I hadn't realized he left. He's tapping away on his phone, not paying much attention. When he looks up, his eyes go to mine and he studies me for a long second, then slides his phone into the inside pocket of his suit coat. Taking a deep breath, he directs his attention to Mia.

She's gathered herself together in the last few moments. Her back is straight, and I can see her patting her hair back into place. Eventually she turns, finding Ares only a few feet away from her with his hands tucked into his pockets, drawing the fitted material even tighter across his rump. I look away quickly, irritated at myself for even noticing at a time like this.

"I called a car for you. It shouldn't be too long." Ares casts his gaze over her, his eyes shrewd.

Mia tips her chin in the air and she walks with exaggerated slowness over to her stool, then gathers her purse and jacket from the back. Her back is stiff as she makes her way out of the room, giving each of us a wide berth. I think my open show of powers may have scared her a little more than even I was intending.

Ares lets out a huff. "Let me make sure she gets picked up." He turns to follow Mia out of the room.

Milo takes Ares's abandoned seat, pushing away his plate. Silence falls over our group and I'm not sure what to say at this point. The side door opens, revealing the waitress again. She gives our group a slight nod with a tight smile. "May I?" She places her hand on Mia's plate, waiting for an answer.

"Yes, of course." I stack the plates to make them easier for her to gather. Her presence seems to have broken the proverbial ice. Dante stands, raising his arms up above his head in a languid stretch. "Want to wait in the car?" he rumbles.

"Sounds like a plan." Ollie jumps up from his seat and Milo is quick to follow.

I'm slower to rise. "The bill," I murmur, looking to see if the waitress placed it somewhere.

Milo leans down. "What was that?"

"The check, we need to pay the bill."

"Mr. Costa has already taken care of the bill." The waitress backs out of the room, her arms piled high with plates and glasses.

We make our way through the restaurant, seeing several other private rooms, and the normal tables and booths you'd expect to find. Ares is standing near a bar not too far from the host's podium. Mia pushes out of the ladies' room as we approach.

Not even acknowledge her, Dante folds his fingers over mine as we continue out the door.

Milo hangs back, stopping at Ares's side. "We'll wait in the car." I don't hear Ares's response, or if he even had one, as the door closes behind us.

I draw in a deep breath once we're out in the open. "Sorry, I let her get to me," I admit as we make our way over to Dante's car.

"Mia can be a bitch." Ollie shrugs like it's enough of an explanation. He opens the passenger door and pushes the seat forward to climb in the back. Ducking my head, I follow after him.

"I still shouldn't have done that, it was too risky."

"You're still learning, nobody blames you Laura," Milo soothes as he settles into the front seat. Dante doesn't start the engine, but he cranks down his window to get a little air in the car.

"I'm excited to get back in the house. I dismissed it too fast last time." Ollie changes the subject as he leans forward, folding his arms on the front seat. His right arm lands on Milo's shoulder and he gives a little squeeze. "Think we could clear out a room or two, pile a bunch of stuff downstairs or something so we can get a better idea of the space?"

Milo nods. "We could do that, the lower level was pretty bare." He turns a bit more to face the middle, and Ollie's hand slides closer to his chest. "It would make it easy for the movers to get everything out anyway, those front stairs would be a bitch to get the furniture up and down."

"Think we could convince Ares to spend the night there tonight? Then we could be there tomorrow and make sure the movers finish." Ollie runs his hand over Milo's pectoral in a caress.

"Wouldn't count on it, you know how he likes everything just so, unless..." All three guys look at each other, speaking in some silent code.

"Unless, Laura asks him," Ollie finishes. Confirming I was right about their hive mind meld.

“It would be easier than waking up super early and driving out here to meet the movers,” Milo adds, being all reasonable.

I roll my eyes, not nearly as confident in my ability to convince Ares as they seem to be. “Where would we sleep?” I don’t want to sleep in a stranger’s bed. I suppress a shudder.

“We could get some sleeping bags,” Ollie quickly replies.

“Or we could go get the mattress from the house,” Dante interjects. I’m not excited to sleep on the floor, so his plan sounds good. I’m not afraid to admit I’ve become a little spoiled since living with the guys. “I bet we could even get our dads to bring them over, we wouldn’t even have to drive back to Canton tonight. You know Mom will want to see it anyway.”

Milo nods his head, agreeing. A shadow falls over the car before Ares taps on the driver’s side window. Dante cranks it down the rest of the way.

“You want to follow me over?”

“Oh yeah, that sounds good. Laura, why don’t you ride with him,” Ollie suggests a little too quickly. Ares’s eyes narrow, scanning each of the guys suspiciously. He knows they’re up to something.

I shake my head, thinking that Ollie has a lot to learn about subtlety. Ares’s eyes land on mine, assessing. His lips lift on one corner, before he schools his features into something sterner. “Well, come on little sacrifice. I know there’s no way they’d offer you up without a reason. Let’s say they’ve piqued my curiosity.”

Dante drops his head back to the headrest and groans. Milo lets out a little chuckle as he glances over at Ollie in accusation. Ollie scrunches up his lips, and states, “Too much.” He nods, understanding his error.



Using my shirtsleeve, I wipe across my brow. It’s almost seventy-five degrees today and I’m feeling the heat. Dante and Milo lost their shirts over an hour ago. Watching them use brute strength to lug around a bunch of

furniture is enough to make me sweat, but at least I can blame the temperature.

“Got another one.” Ollie’s voice echoes down into the garage.

Milo stands from his crouched position as he releases the legs of the couch, a light sheen of sweat coating his chest and arms. “Coming,” he hollers back. “I got this one if you want to grab a drink,” he adds, talking to Dante. He looks completely relaxed. It’s probably the first time I’ve seen him using his ability so much.

Dante rises, a little slower than Milo, but he doesn’t look nearly as exhausted as I feel just watching them. I’ve only been carrying the smaller stuff up and down the stairs and my legs feel like jello. He nods, and replies, “Ares should be back soon, you want anything?”

“I’ll take a Gatorade, orange if he has it.” Milo bounds up the stairs two at a time.

Dante glances over in my direction and he lifts his hand, beckoning me forward. “How about you, we working you too hard?”

Even though we’re both hot and sweaty, I give in to the urge to lean against him. The power inside me swirls to life. I draw in his scent, Dante smells like worn leather with something musky underneath. Delicious. I brush my nose against his bare skin and low sound rumbles up my throat. Dante slides his fingers into my hair, his palms on my cheeks, and tips my face up so he can press his lips to mine.

He takes his time exploring my mouth, his tongue sliding past my lips to tangle with mine. I crawl my hands up his chest, loving the way his muscles bunch under my touch. Once my hands are up around his neck, I lock my fingers together and climb up his body, wrapping my legs around his waist. Dante takes my weight the moment my feet leave the ground, cupping my bottom and pulling me tightly against him.

My brash behavior is not even registering. Dante just accepts it, while I’m driven mostly by instinct alone. Keeping my arms over his shoulder I thread my fingers through his thick hair, tilting his head so I can deepen the kiss. Dante runs one of his hands over my butt and slides it up under my shirt, securing me to him firmly. I lock my ankles around his back and settle against him, enjoying the feel of his warm, hard body.

In the distance I hear car tires crunching along the driveway. Ares left to go to the store and to meet his parents so they could follow him back here. Reluctantly, I slow the kiss after several open-mouthed pecks, and I lean back

and look down at him. Dante is slow to open his eyes, not making a move to release me.

I kiss his forehead and wrap my arms around his head, tucking him to my chest. Dante nuzzles his face against me, and I feel his chest expand as he drags in a deep breath. Walking over to the old green couch, he balances his butt on the back and I slide a little lower as he does, straddling his hips now. I feel his erection under me, and I tuck my face into his neck and close my eyes—it's a fight not to rock against him.

A car door slams, followed quickly by another. I still don't want to move, but I know I should. I give Dante one final, tight squeeze before lessening my hold on him. Dante grabs my hips and eases me down until my shoes touch the ground, and his forehead rolls across mine before he gives me another sweet kiss on the corner of my lips.

Ares reaches the open garage door with a white Styrofoam cooler in his arms. Dante lays his arm over my shoulder. "Do you need a hand grabbing anything?"

"Here, if you want to take this I can go get changed. I had Mom grab me something." Ares holds out the cooler.

Dante steps away from me and takes it, flipping the lid up to look inside. He grabs a Gatorade and holds it out to Ares, then reaches back in for a couple waters. "If you're going up, take this to Milo." Dante gestures to the drink in Ares's hand.

Ares looks around, stepping closer as he does. "You guys already got a lot of stuff done." He pulls the plastic bottle from my hands and drops a kiss quickly to my lips. I peek up at Dante to see his reaction, but he's looking around the garage, already stacked with furniture.

"This isn't even half of it, those people had way too much shit." Dante cracks the lid on one bottle and hands it over to me first.

I take it happily, tipping my head back and gulping down the icy cold liquid.

When half the bottle is gone, I look back up and find both of the guys watching me. "Thirsty?" Ares questions.

I look at the bottle in my hand wondering why they're staring at me. "Ah yeah, did you want some?" I offer the bottle to them, thinking maybe I drank too much, and maybe he only picked up a few.

Heavy footsteps on the stairs have me turning away before they answer. Milo is coming down the steps slowly. His arms wrapped around the bottom

half of a recliner. “You want a hand?” Dante offers.

“Nah, everybody is here, I figured I’d bring this down before we took a break.” Milo sets the chair near the corner, and then he stands and looks around. “Unless we start stacking stuff on top of each other, we’re about out of room.”

Ares extends his hand out to Milo, the orange drink he asked for held out. Milo grabs it, taking a few sips while still surveying the garage.

“We could put stuff over there.” Dante points to a heavy door.

“Definitely some boxes and stuff, but it’ll suck to get the bigger stuff through that door,” Milo tells him, closing the lid to his drink and tossing it onto one of the couches.

“I’m going to go get changed. Why don’t you guys come up so we can show everyone around, then figure out where to pile the rest of this shit.” Ares’s fingers brush along my neck as he passes me to head for the stairs.

Milo and Dante turn to follow him up, I trail behind them. I can hear Ollie before I see him. “I thought it was too small when we first looked at it, but now that all the furniture is out of here it’s not too bad.”

As I reach the top of the stairs, I see Linda and Matt walking around the kitchen, opening cabinet doors and looking over the counters. “I really like it.” Linda spins, going closer to the window. Her hand comes up to touch the glass, “Look out there, you can see forever.”

Matt notices us first. “Hey guys.” A wide grin overtakes his face. “How’s being a first-time homeowner treating you.”

Ares continues past them. “No complaints from me.”

“You haven’t done anything!” Ollie calls to him as he walks away.

“It’s not like you’ve done much other than delegate.” Milo crosses his arms over his chest with his eyebrows raised.

Ollie points at his head. “It’s all up here—paint, flooring, furniture. Somebody has to think ahead, take care of the hard stuff.”

Dante snorts and shakes his head. Their easy banter has me grinning. Ares returns, he’s in a short-sleeved, dark gray t-shirt with a loose pair of gym shorts. I’ve seen Ares in his boxers, but for some reason he looks strange in the shorts.

He looks down at himself when I don’t stop staring. “What?”

I glance around, but no one else seems to think he looks strange. Milo is chatting with Matt, running his hand over the kitchen counter. Dante disappeared at some point, and Ollie is holding up his phone with swatches of

colors against the wall.

“I don’t know, I guess I’ve never seen you in shorts. I’m used to suits and the occasional pair of sweats.”

“I think it would be kind of restricting to work in my suit pants, but I can change if you’d like.”

I swat his arm when he moves to my side. “Stop it, it just took me off guard.” Ares grins at me teasingly. He places his arms behind him and leans against the counter. Milo and Matt have moved into another room, leaving only Ollie and Linda, but they’re much too interested in the paint colors to notice the blush that stains my cheeks as my eyes travel over Ares. He’s just way too damn attractive for his own good. He’s not even trying, and I can’t take my eyes off him.

“I wish it wasn’t so far away, but I do really like it. I can see why you snagged it up.” Rosa enters the room, coming over to me. She leans in for a quick hug and retreats back to Mal who is right behind her. Dante must have gone looking for them, because he’s follows them in.

The room feels smaller with so many of us in here, but I’m not uncomfortable in the least. A thrill of excitement goes through me, they’re happy for us. My thoughts careen to my mom, and how she would feel. The excitement fizzles away.

I lean against Ares’s arm, not even realizing I’m looking for comfort. Knowing they’re here and part of this journey makes me think about her, how different things could have been if she told me the truth, or if her pair wasn’t a nutcase.

Ares wraps his arm around my back, his hand going to my neck as his fingers begin to trace over my skin. “Looks like you guys got most of the stuff from the living room. Should we start on one of the bedrooms, so we’ll have room for our stuff?” Ares continues his massage, not realizing the happiness I was feeling is now tainted.

“Yeah, I know the room down here is bigger, but we need to replace the flooring. So, I think we should just throw everything upstairs, that way we don’t have to juggle it around when we get the floors done.” Ollie turns to face us, proving he really was paying attention.

“That’s fine, it’s probably best if we hold off on anything that isn’t absolutely necessary anyway since we rushed the move,” Ares concedes.

“It’ll be easier with us here anyway, we have the rest of the week off to

help rip out carpet and do any demo that's needed," Milo adds, leaning on the doorframe.

"What can we do to help?" Mal offers.

CHAPTER 18

It's late by the time I finally crawl into bed. Carolyn and her guys showed up a little after our talk in the kitchen with several boxes of pizza and drinks. My eyes are gritty and my hair feels like I've been at the beach from the amount of dust we kicked up moving everything around.

I almost feel guilty getting into bed without a shower, but the thought passes quickly when my back hits the mattress. A long sigh leaves my lips and my eyes close quickly.

"The movers will be here early, I'll probably stick around to help them. Ollie wants you to go with him to pick out paint." I turn on my side and face Milo.

He's still shirtless and I hope it's a trend he keeps. I reach out and place my hand on his chest. "I don't know how you're not already passed out. You kicked major furniture butt moving today."

Milo places his hand over mine, trapping it against his chest. "I'm a little tired," he admits, his eyes growing heavily lidded.

The floor creaks and Ollie shuffles over, and drops on the bed next to Milo. You'd think he did all the heavy lifting to day instead. Curling on his side he wraps his arm over Milo's waist and places his hand on my hip. He lifts his head so I can see him over the bulk of Milo's shoulder and purses his lips. I lean up and place my lips on his, knowing that's what he wanted. He drops back down, and I hear the smack of his lips as he leans in and kisses Milo's back. "Night guys," He says around a yawn.

I peer up at Milo and give him a little grin before I smack a quick kiss against his lips. "Night."



“Oliver,” any patience I had evaporated an hour ago, “I don’t care if it’s two shades off, they look exactly the same, just pick one.”

“Someone didn’t get enough sleep last night.” He wiggles his eyebrows at me, still not taking me seriously. I let out a long groan.

The girl with an orange apron behind the paint desk makes a little pouty face. “This one is a little brighter with more golden undertones.” I roll my eyes at her statement, both of them are yellow.

“Why didn’t we bring Dante, he’s the color expert?”

“Because, Muenster, Dante is putting together our bed.” Ollie tweaks my nose. “You don’t want to sleep on mattresses on the floor again, do you? I sure don’t.”

I bat his hand away. “I slept just fine, princess.”

Ollie narrows his eyes on me, a devilish gleam twinkling in his eyes. “I’ll show you princess.” He drops the two cards with the paint colors and reaches for me, I squirm to avoid his hands, but he’s too fast. In one quick movement he hoists me over his shoulder and swats my butt, hard. “We’ll go with this one.” He reaches down and points to one of the cards with his other hand.

“Put me down,” I grit out through my teeth, looking around to see how much attention he’s drawing.

Ares comes up the aisle, breezing over like it’s no big deal that I’m ass up in a home improvement store. “All settled?”

“Just about. This one for the room, right?” Ollie points at a swatch of dark gray that he’d already set aside for our main bedroom.

“Ares, make him put me down.”

He ignores me. “Yeah, that will do.”

I shove my hands into Ollie’s back pockets and give his rump a hard squeeze. He clenches his muscles and yelps. Then delivers another hard swat to my butt. “Be good, Muenster, and I’ll let you down.”

I growl. If I could see him right now, my look alone would kill him. Bending his knees, he sets my feet back on the floor. I straighten up immediately and flip my hair back over my head. I glance around again,

noting the emptiness of the store. It's just past eight in the morning and there aren't many people out buying paint this early.

Ares reaches for me, placing his palm on my neck, under my hair. He tugs me close, his lips going to my temple. I feel his smile against my cheek. I stare at Ollie, daring him to try something again. I'll be ready this time.

The girl clears her throat, drawing Ollie's attention and his mischievous smirk to her. Her eyes go wide, and she blinks several times. "Did you want me to start mixing these?" she finally blurts.

Ollie places his hands on the desk to sort through the different colors. "Sure thing." He pushes a few in her direction. "We'll need these two in the big bucket."

Snapping my foot out, I kick him with the inside of my foot. He barely moves, but Ares lets out a dark chuckle against my ear.

Ollie turns to look at me slowly. "Ares, hold her. I have an idea."

Ares's fingers tighten on my neck as he draws me closer. "I wouldn't do it if I were you," I warn, speaking to both of them. "Ares, if you hold me for him, I'll take back my offer of always." I cross my arms over my stomach, waiting for Ares to catch on to what I'm saying. He's quick and the pressure from his hand lightens immediately. It's my turn to smirk now. I just learned how easy protection really is.

I lean forward a little and crook my finger at Ollie, telling him to come a little closer. "I win," I whisper.

Without any warning he leans forward and plants a kiss on my lips, when he pulls back his eyes are dancing with playful joy. "For now."

Ares tugs me back again, settling me close to his side and I ask, "Did you find any curtains?"

His shoulder lifts in a slight shrug. "I found something we can use temporarily."

"Should we go grab them while she's mixing the paint?" I suggest, since I'm tired of standing here.

"We can, I came back because I could tell you were going to kill Ollie."

"Kiss me, you mean? She was fighting the urge not to kiss me," Ollie counters.

"Do you think he knows the difference between the two?" Ares jokes.

Ollie bats his ridiculously long eyelashes in our direction. "Might need a reminder." He puckers his lips and starts making smoochy noises.

"We'll give you a demonstration later," Ares retorts dryly. "Come on,

let's grab a cart for the paint."

"Go ahead, I'll wait here." Ollie returns his attention to the color swatches the girl hasn't picked up yet, examining them.

Ares slides his hand down to my lower back, guiding me away from the paint center and a few aisles over, until I see several window treatments high up on the wall. He passes them, heading toward the opposite end.

"What do you think of these?" He touches a set of large white plantation style shutters.

"For outside?" They don't really fit with the exterior of the house.

"No, for our room. I usually get blackout shades, but I thought with something like this, we could open them more, let the light in."

I tilt my head and study Ares. "I think that's very thoughtful of you." He's conceding it's not only his room, but something we can all share.

Ares places his lips in my hair. "I think I enjoy touching the light." His words are spoken softly, reminding me how he once called me his light. I wrap my arm around his waist, enjoying the feel of him.

His hand smooths over my backside and he gives me a little tap. "I think these will do until we all decide on the furniture and decor." He points to a heavy pair of black drapes with a thick thermal backing.

He grabs four packages from a lower shelf, holding them under his arm. He's left off his trademarked vest today, going instead with a fitted, charcoal button-up shirt and black trousers. I feel underdressed next to him in my jeans and oversized t-shirt, but he looks at me like I'm decked out in the latest fashion.

We make our way to the front of the store to get a flatbed cart to haul everything. Ollie is waiting for us when we return, with several cans already mixed and sitting on the counter. He and Ares transport everything onto the cart, while we wait for the two larger buckets to be mixed.

Ollie goes up and down the aisle, adding paint trays and stirrers, along with several different brushes, rollers, and tape.

"I've never painted a room before, is this everything we'll need?" I gaze over the small mountain of supplies.

Ollie examines his haul, "This should be good, for now at least. We don't need drop cloths or anything since we're redoing the floors."

"What about the ceilings?"

"Shit," Ollie curses. "Good thing you said something."

He moseys back down the aisle, grabbing another big bucket. "This one

says, ‘white ceiling paint.’ You good with that?”

I look over at Ares expecting him to answer, but he’s looking at me. “It’s fine with me,” I splutter.

“All right, here’s the last one.” The girl lugs a big bucket up to the high counter using both hands. She reaches down and retrieves a couple of long wooden sticks, and places them on top of the bucket. “Careful with this one, the paint isn’t dry yet.” She points to the lid where I see a smudge of soft gray paint sampled across the top.

Ares grabs the handle and loads it onto the flatbed cart, along with all the others. “Thanks.” He nods in the woman’s direction. “Anything else you can think of?”

I look around and an endcap display catches my eye. “We should get some cleaning supplies, for the bathrooms and kitchen.”

We head farther down the aisle and Ollie grabs a bulk-sized package of paper towels. I add another of toilet paper on top. A few aisles away we find an area with several household cleaners.

Ares reaches for a box of heavy-duty black bags, while I grab a few different bottles of cleaners.

When we’re done, Ollie gives the cart a shove to get it moving and we finally make our way up to the checkout.

I shiver when the double doors open for our exit; it was so warm yesterday. I didn’t bother with a jacket when we left this morning. The sun is already up, but the cool night air hasn’t burned away yet.

Ollie leans his stomach over the high bar of the cart and pushes off with his feet, so he glides through the crosswalk as he heads in the direction of Ares’s SUV. The back hatch flips open as we approach. Ares jerks his chin at me and says, “You can get in, it’s chilly.”

Seeing there isn’t enough room for all three of us to load up the trunk, I agree, sliding into the leather bucket seat in the back. I should have hit the button to start the car first, my butt is freezing on the cold leather.

They make quick work of loading our purchases, and Ollie returns the cart while Ares gets behind the wheel and starts the car. He looks over his shoulder at me. “You have your license, right? Know how to drive?”

“I can drive, but I don’t have a license.”

“Well, we should probably do something about that. You can either wait until you’re eighteen and go take the test, or you’ll have to take a driver’s training course if you don’t want to wait.” Ollie climbs in the car at the tail

end of Ares's speech.

"I've been driving the motor home for years, I don't really need instruction. I can just wait, I'll be eighteen in a few months anyway."

"Did you ever get pulled over when you were driving?" Ollie seems to have gotten the gist of the conversation.

"Once, but the cop didn't give me a ticket or anything." I haven't thought about that in a while. I was only fifteen when it happened. We were driving through Kentucky. The roads there are narrow and hilly, he said I'd crossed the yellow line, which was probably true.

Mom came up from the back when she heard the sirens and noticed the lights. "Don't worry, just tell the truth. It'll be fine," she told me, sitting down in the passenger seat completely calm.

I rolled down my window, heart in my throat, just knowing I would go to jail. "Evening young lady," the officer greeted me, and glanced over to my mom. "You know why I pulled you over?"

"No, sir." I turn to look at him briefly, then face the front window again.

"Well, you were drifting over the line quite a bit. Can I see your license and registration?"

I turn to look at my mom, my eyes wide, asking what I should do. She calmly reaches into the glove box and retrieves a small square of paper and a plastic membership card for a library.

"Here you go sir, she hasn't been driving very long. I thought since the traffic was light, it would be a good chance for her to practice."

He takes the papers from my mother's outstretched hand and glances down. His eyes narrow. I remember thinking we were both going to be in so much trouble. The library card didn't even have a picture on it.

He glanced up at me, then over at my mom, his lips thinned, and he gave a slight shake of his head before holding the papers in through my window for me to take back.

"Take care on these back roads ladies, they're narrow." I pulled the papers into the cab, shock keeping me from responding as he turned and walked away.

The revelation of what really happens hits me quickly. My mom must have used some kind of compulsion on him. "Oh my God."

"What is it?" Ares hits the breaks too hard and the SUV jerks to a halt.

Thank goodness we're not even out of the parking lot yet. My tone must have alerted him that something was wrong.

"When you asked if I ever got pulled over..." I swallow thickly, my mind speeding through other memories to see if I remember any other times something like that could have happened. "When we got pulled over, I wasn't even legal to drive yet. My mom, she gave him a library card and a scrap of paper, but he acted like he thought it was my license and registration. She must have voodooed his mind or something, because he just walked away, told us to drive carefully. I don't know how I could have forgotten that." I rub my temples in my hands feeling a headache coming on.

The car starts rolling forward again. "You might not have forgotten, she might have made you forget."

"What?" I whisper in shock.

"It actually makes sense, if your mother has been manipulating your memories, that means what you do remember about her disappearance, and right before, might be false memories. Maybe the things you think you remember are what she wanted you to remember." Ares's eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror. I look away and scrub my hands over my face.

"This might help Laura, maybe there's a clue in your memories. Something we haven't figured out yet." Ollie reaches back and lays his hand on my knee.

I think back to everything that happened in the weeks since we'd moved to Canton. The only thing that keeps nagging at me is the night I heard her talking, but I didn't hear anything useful. I blow out a frustrated breath.

"How many more lies and deceptions? How am I ever going to know what's the truth?"

"We'll figure it out Laura." Ares glides the car onto the road, our journey more somber. We make another stop at a fast-food restaurant before returning home.

Ares parks the car near the entrance but doesn't get out. "Are we going in?" I wonder, not sure why he didn't just hit the drive-thru.

"In a minute," Ares answers. He turns in his seat, so he can see me. "I don't know your mom." I look away, not sure if I'm ready to have a conversation about her right now, I feel even more betrayed. "But I don't think she was trying to hurt you. I bet she was doing her best to protect you."

I know he's probably right, but I'm still hurt. Still too raw to accept it for

the truth just yet. I nod anyway, letting him know I'm hearing him. I may not be ready to believe it yet, but I hear him.

CHAPTER 19

The moving truck is already parked in front of the garage when we return home. A little of the sadness I was feeling dissipates when I see our house nestled back in the mountainside.

How I got here isn't important, what's important is that I'm here with them now. And no matter what my mom has or hasn't done, I still love her, and I'm still going to find out where she is. There are no other options for me.

I climb out of the back seat, bringing several bags with me as I do. Ares opens the rear door after getting out and grabs several drink trays, filled with orange juice and coffee, off the floorboard. He snaps the door closed with his hip.

Milo jogs over and takes the bags from my hands. "Hey, took you guys forever." He leans in and places a soft kiss against my lips. I'm still getting used to this more affectionate side of Milo.

"Ollie." I roll my eyes, putting all the blame on him. "How long have they been here?" I point over to the moving truck with several guys already loading things up the ramp.

"Not long, thirty minutes or so."

"Geeze, no wonder Ares ordered so much." I don't bother trying to count the men going in and out of the truck. We might not have enough.

Milo looks down at the bags he took from me. "You mean this is supposed to feed more than Dante?" He grins, telling me he's only joking. "Come on, let's go feed him, he's already hangry."

Dante prowls out of the open garage before we make it inside. His eyes already focused in my direction. He tilts his chin in the air and his chest

expands, the tightly packed muscles roping up his sides standing out. I watch as his shoulders slump a little and he lowers his head; it does nothing to hide his predatory lope as he comes toward us.

“He’s been crabby even since he woke up and found out you guys were already gone,” Milo warns quietly. “I’ll meet you upstairs,” he adds louder, leaving me to fend for myself.

Instead of meeting Dante halfway I stand my ground, waiting for him to come to me. His steps never slow as he pushes into my space, not touching me, but almost.

I reach out and walk my fingers from his waist up to his chest, placing my palm over his heart. “I thought you were hungry. Ollie and Milo have the food.”

“You didn’t wake me,” he says like I’ve broken some unspoken rule.

“I didn’t know I was supposed to,” I counter licking my lips.

Dante leans down, careless of the people around us, and licks the seam of my lips. He groans over my mouth. “You taste like coffee and paradise.”

I wrap my arm around his neck. “You feel like home.”

Dante makes a low rumbling sound from his chest and wraps his arms around me. One under my butt, the other over the small of my back. My legs dangle as he lifts me and spins around to head back into the garage. I chance a look around before folding my other arm around his neck. Most of the moving guys are gone, probably already upstairs eating if I had to guess.

Dante deposits me at the base of the stairs and I steal a kiss as he bends down. “Thanks for the lift.” He’s right on my heels as I hustle up the steps, my body full of restless energy.

Six strangers are in the kitchen as I crest the stairs, Milo is sitting, his legs dangling off the counter, and Ollie is perched next to him. I glance around for Ares, but I can’t see him.

“Here you go.” Ollie lifts up a smaller bag.

Dante follows me over. Peering in the bag, I hand him two breakfast sandwiches over my shoulder and pull out a hash brown, it’s already cold, but it’s still crispy, so I munch it down.

There are some muffled conversations, the moving guys talk about an upcoming football game and their holiday plans. They don’t stick around long after eating, and several mutter their thanks as they get back to work.

“Did Ares eat?” I wipe my hands with a scratchy brown napkin.

Milo shrugs. “I thought he was just going to change. There’s

still some left though.”

I glance around at the kitchen, all the cabinets are open in various stages of emptiness, and several boxes litter the floor. It already looks so different. I can see the grease stains behind the stovetop, the heavy wear on the most used cabinets. But it already feels more like our house with every piece that disappear into boxes. “Why did they sell?” I blurt the question out of the blue.

“No one ever said as far as I know.” Ollie hops down from the counter. “Milo, will you help me?”

Milo tilts his head. “You mean, Milo, will you lug shit around for me?”

“Well, you’re just so good at it, and you look so pretty doing it.” A scoff leaves Milo, but he follows after Ollie, his hands braced on his shoulders.

“I’m on stacking duty,” Dante tells me from the floor where he’s sitting, after finishing his third sandwich.

“What’s stacking duty?”

“Keeping an eye on the movers, making sure nothing gets broken. Ollie has to do it after lunch.”

“Do you want me to come with?” I offer.

Dante shrugs and wipes his hand across his mouth. “You don’t have to. I’ve been loading the truck so I’m not just standing around.”

“I guess I’ll go check on Ares, see if he ate.” I run my hands through Dante’s hair, he tilts his head back to rest against my thighs, his eyes closing. Turning his face, he nuzzles his cheek against me, but with him sitting on the floor and me standing, he’s dangerously close to the apex of my thighs.

Butterflies tickle my lower stomach and nervous excitement fills me when Dante slowly blinks his eyes open to look up at me. He reaches back and his warm palm wraps around the back of my leg. I scratch my short nails over his scalp, enjoying the way he tilts his, head eager for my touch.

“I’ll grab more boxes,” I hear an unfamiliar voice call, followed by footsteps on the stairs.

I don’t pull away from Dante, a little part of me gets angered by the interruption. I narrow my eyes on the man coming up the stairs, not caring he’s here to do a job, the front of my mouth aches. My lip instinctively lifting in a sneer.

“Hey,” Dante barks, his deep voice loud and hard. My gaze latches onto him, still on the floor in front of me, but his attention is on the guys at the top of the stairs. It’s enough of a distraction for me to gather my senses. “There

are boxes in the living room that are ready,” Dante adds in a more normal tone.

The guy spares us a strange look, but heads into the living room. I lean down and place my forehead on his and groan. “It’s not even safe for you to be in a room alone with me.” I try to make it sound like I’m joking, but I’m really not.

Dante turns, placing his hands on the ground beside my feet. He pushes up to stand, his body skimming mine as he does. “We both know my safety wasn’t in question.” I bite the corner of my lip, he’s right. I would never hurt him, but the things I feel, the things I want from him when we’re alone, kinda scare me.

Dante leans down so I can feel the ghost of his lips over mine. Pushing up on my toes I close the distance. He opens the moment my mouth lands on his, accepting me as I slide into his warm mouth. I break the kiss off sooner than either of us would have liked, if his short gasping breaths are any sign.

He straightens, his eyes raking over me, but never once pushes me for an ounce more than I give him. A thrill of excitement has me blowing out a shaky breath. I love having him at my mercy. Looking at him you’d assume Dante is brash, bossy, and demanding. Everything about him screams predator. From his broody looks and quiet demeanor, to the sheer size of him. But nothing could be further from the truth, not when it comes to me.

The mover comes through the kitchen, holding two boxes and pretending to ignore us, but I see him watching us from the corner of his eye.

“I’ll be down after I check on Ares.” My voice is husky, and Dante nods but doesn’t move. I turn away then look over my shoulder to watch him, he hasn’t taken his eyes off me. I rush out of the room before I can turn back around and drag him into one of the empty rooms upstairs.

I pause once I reach stairs. I feel jittery, like I had a couple cups of coffee instead of just the one. The noise of the men outside calling to each other, chatting while they load the truck, reaches my ears.

I close my eyes and seek out Ares. It takes barely any energy to see him sitting on the bed with his laptop across his knees. His shirt is untucked and unbuttoned like he was in the middle of changing when he got distracted.

Pulling back to myself, I start up the stairs and head in his direction. When I reach the room, I lean against the doorframe, my eyes tracking over him lazily. The immediate difference in the way my mind and body feels is a little jarring. The hunger to dominate is gone. I’ve never once had the urge to

make Ares bend to my will.

There's something different that drives me when I'm with Ares. The complete and utter feeling of safety and acceptance. I'm free to give him all the control because I know he would never abuse it. After taking care of myself for so long, it's such a relief to be able to let go.

I let out a breathy sigh, I'm so lucky. It's not that he can buy a house at the drop of a hat, or how alluring he is, even when he's not trying. No, it the way he looks at me, like I'm the only person in the room. The way he touches me like he craves the feel of my skin, and that's just Ares. How I'm lucky enough to get all four, will probably boggle my mind for the rest of my life.

"Hey, did you eat?" He looks up, his eyes blinking like he was totally lost in thought.

"Is there any left?" he asks, telling me he hasn't.

"I think so, you want me to grab you something?"

"I was planning on coming right back down," Ares adds, pushing the computer off his legs and onto the bed. "I'll grab whatever's left when I go down."

I take a few more steps into the room, it already smells like them in here. Dante's warm leather mixes with the slight char of campfire from Ollie, and the tang of iron from Milo, but Ares's ozone scent is strongest now.

"What are you doing?" I lean against the wall, not trusting that I won't end up in the bed with him if I get too close.

"Checking emails." He changes the subject, and inquires, "The guys already back to work?"

"Yeah, Ollie has Milo doing the heavy lifting someplace, and Dante went down to keep an eye on the movers and help them load the truck."

"You're very far away." Ares leans against the wall at the top of the bed, inviting me closer with just a look. I smile but don't move. "How am I supposed to help if I don't have anything to change into?" He nods his head in my direction.

I stretch the loose fabric of his t-shirt over my stomach. "You left it on the end of the bed, fair game," I challenge.

"Oh, is that how it works?" A genuine smile lifts his lips reaching his eyes.

"It is now." I enjoy our banter. Ares doesn't strike me as one to really play and joke around like Ollie does. "Besides, if you take your shirt back, I'll be left with nothing to wear." The flirting, though new to me, comes

easily.

“I can see how that would be a problem, unless...” Ares pushes up off the bed. My intention of keeping my distance vanishes as he stalks closer. “Unless you want to crawl in bed, get nice and comfy. You wouldn’t need the shirt or anything else in here.” His voice drops down low, his breath caressing my skin with heated words.

I swallow, cutting my eyes to him. “We literally have a house full of strangers and you want me in bed, naked? While you guys do all the work?”

Ares’s arms come up over my shoulders and he cages me in, and my hands reach for his waist through his open shirt. His lips graze my ear, and in a guttural whisper he says, “I’d have to tuck you in first. Make sure you stayed nice and warm.” Ares captures the bottom of my earlobe between his teeth.

Heat pools in my lower stomach and I fight the urge to lean into him. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

Ares moves even closer, his elbows on the wall next to my shoulders. “I wouldn’t be complaining,” he mutters. I plant my hands over Ares’s chest, intending to push him away, but I get distracted by the feeling of his warm skin under my palms.

“I told Dante I would come down to help, are you going to stay up here and work?”

Ares places a soft kiss under my ear. “No, I took the rest of the week off.”

“You did?” That succeeds in surprising me enough that I do push him slightly away, so I can see his face.

“Why do you sound so shocked?”

“I don’t know, it just surprises me.”

“Well, if you don’t want me around...” Ares teases.

I roll my eyes, not sure if I should feed into his ego. “You know that’s not true, I’m happy you’ll be home.”

“Good, but it’s not like I would have left, even if you wanted me to.” Ares backs away from me, turning to reaching for a large black duffel bag on the floor. He crouches to sort through the bag, pulling a soft gray t-shirt free.

I cross my arms over my stomach. “You needed my shirt, huh?”

“Did I say needed? It was probably more of a want.” A grin tilts his lips as he stands to shrug out of the button-up shirt, tossing it on the bed. The picture he makes is too damn tempting. His wide chest tapers down to his narrow waist, all tightly packed muscles without being bulky. It’s enough to

have me wondering if climbing back in bed and having him tuck me in should be an idea I explore more thoroughly.

Completely unabashed Ares stands there, allowing me to take him in, the gray shirt forgotten in his hand.

“I’ll meet you downstairs,” I say, but it comes out more like a forlorn sign. Ares has the good graces not to laugh at me as I make my hasty retreat from the room.

CHAPTER 20

“*H*ere, it’s best if you do long, even strokes. Like this.” Milo places his hand over mine as I grip the handle of the paint roller. His pushes up until my arm reaches as far as I can comfortably, then pulls it back down. The noise of the tacky roller running along the wall fills my ears as he continues, his hand still guiding mine until we make a tightly packed W.

“Don’t worry about trying to get too close to the molding, that will need to be cut in,” he explains as he continues using my hand. “We need a little more paint.” Milo guides me through applying more paint onto the roller and evening it out by rolling it over the slanted tray.

I’m pretty sure I have the hang of it, but I don’t stop him from continuing right along with me. Milo’s frame towers over me, his warmth and closeness making the empty room feel so much more comfortable.

Walking around the barren house after the movers left an hour ago felt strange. It’s hard to believe how much we all accomplished in such a short time. Now that all the pictures are off the walls, and all the furniture is gone, you can see the stains their existence left behind. Rectangles of brighter paint decorate the walls, cobwebs cling to fixtures, and dust bunnies are lingering in the corners. Now the house almost feels too big.

“Hey, how’s it going?” Ollie’s voice echoes off the walls.

Milo’s hand pauses, but he doesn’t release me. “Good, I guess. Are you sure we won’t need a primer? It doesn’t look like this place has been painted since they built it.” After using all the paint on the roller, he steps back and give me a little space to continue on my own.

“Nah, should be fine, this paint has a primer in it. One coat coverage or

some shit.” Ollie walks over to inspect my work, or the color. “Looks like it’s covering okay.”

I dip back into the tray and roll off the excess like Milo showed me, and keep working. I don’t even want to count how many more rooms we need to paint.

“I’m going to grab a brush and a small bucket, I’ll be right back,” Milo announces, leaving Ollie and I alone in the room.

“Having fun, Muenster?”

I glance over my shoulder, so I can see Ollie. “I don’t know if fun would be the way I’d describe it, but I’m not, not having fun. How’s the bathroom coming along?” I suppress a smile. Ollie whined for five minutes that he drew the short straw and had to clean the main floor bathroom.

“Done, thank fuck,” he groans dramatically. I snicker, wondering if Dante is done cleaning the second one. “You think that’s funny, do you?”

I school my features, turning to gather more paint. “Not really, but your reaction was.”

“I really hate cleaning,” he mutters dejectedly.

“Are you going to help us paint?” I push the roller over the wall, enjoying how I can see all the progress I’ve already made. Maybe this won’t take that long after all.

“Might as well. If we can get enough rooms painted, we might be able to get some flooring installed, then furniture. I can’t wait until we can set up the living room.”

Ollie’s excitement is contagious. I can’t help but think of how fun it will be to pick out all our own things. Even better, we’ll have the place to ourselves. I won’t have to feel weird about lying on the couch and watching TV with the guys, or grabbing a drink from the fridge. Not that anyone ever really made me feel weird, it was mostly my own insecurities.

“I grabbed the ladder too.” I look over to the doorway and see Milo angling himself into the room. A short ladder sits on one shoulder, while his other hand has a small paint bucket with a brush handle sticking out of the top.

Ares follows in after him, setting an empty paint tray and a roller on a longer handle on the floor. “It’s nice with it being empty like this, makes the work a lot faster.” He glances around, noting my nearly finished wall.

Milo sets up the ladder in the corner and fills his little bucket with paint from the can, a few drops splatter to the floor. “Maybe we should have pulled

the carpet up first?” He looks around.

“It doesn’t matter. This will be dry by tomorrow, then we can rip it out. Who knows, maybe there will be hardwood under here.” Ares walks over to the corner opposite Milo and crouches. He tugs at the green carpet, pulling it back to reveal plywood. He stands and kicks the carpet back into place. “Nope, just subflooring.”

“Where’s Dante?” I ask, wiping my face against the shoulder of my shirt. I don’t know if it’s having so many bodies in here or what, but it feels like the humidity in the room has doubled.

“He was still in the master bathroom when I came up,” Ares answers.

Milo is running his brush along the wall under the ceiling, making sure not to get any paint up there.

“I know you guys are excited to get this place cleaned up a bit, but we should talk about what changes we need to make before we do much more than painting the bedrooms. If we are going to knock out a wall up here, put in a big master bedroom, then we’d need to add a bathroom up here too. There’s no point in doing it twice.”

I continue painting, but keep my eyes on the guys also. I’m curious about what they think needs to be done.

“It seems kind of pointless to make any major renovations if this place is only temporary. I think the kitchen and baths need updating, but the rest seems okay,” Ollie offers, but seems a little unsure of himself.

Milo pauses and turns, the paint brush dangling from his fingers. “I don’t think this place is that bad. I’m with Ollie on the kitchen and bathrooms, but the rest of it seems okay. It feels a lot bigger now that all those people’s crap is gone.”

“Okay, so paint the upstairs, figure out the flooring, and then we can discuss the main floor and lower level. I’m not so sure that master on the main floor will work, but we can figure that out later.” Ares nods his head, looking around. “I’m going to round up Dante, we can get started on the other room. There are too many of us to work in here.”

Ollie pours more paint into my tray and grabs up the extra roller Ares brought in. Between the three of us, we have the walls completely painted within forty minutes. Milo suggested we wait until we know what kind of flooring we’re going to have before painting the molding.

Once we’re finished, Milo tosses the disposable tray liner into a larger black trash bag. I gather the rollers and the brush he used to take down

downstairs so I can use the laundry tub to rinse them. Ollie joined Dante and Ares in the second upstairs bedroom to help, so I suspect it won't be long before that one's done too.

"Knock, knock," Linda calls, opening the front door. Carolyn is right behind her.

"Hey." I juggle the things in my hands, rushing over to pull the door all the way open. "The guys are upstairs, I'm heading down to clean these up." I hold up the brush and two rollers.

"You guys are working fast, I love it. How can we help?" Linda rubs her hands together, examining the empty room.

"I think we're going to tag team the kitchen next. If you want to help clean I, for one, would be very grateful."

"You got it." Carolyn sets her bag on the floor near the door. "Wow, it seems so much bigger."

"I know it does, they had a lot of stuff crammed in here," I agree. "I'll be right back."

I hustle through the kitchen to get to the stairs for the lower level. Realizing for the first time it's not going to be fun lugging laundry up and down the stairs, but it's still a hell of a lot easier than having to go to the laundry mat.



By late afternoon they've scoured the kitchen clean. Carolyn and Linda worked as a team and had the place sparkling quicker than I could have imagined. Even the shelves of the outdated refrigerator are gleaming.

We're all dotted through the room, some standing, some perched on the counter, trying to decide on what actual renovations need to be made. If you ask me, the place is fine exactly like it is, but Ares and Ollie have different ideas on how to make it more comfortable. "The kitchen isn't big enough." Ollie crosses his arms over his chest.

"I think the size is okay but the layout, the amount of cabinets, and the storage is where it's lacking." Linda looks around, her eyes critical.

"That's what I meant," Ollie adds, pointing toward her.

"Unless you guys are planning on making daily runs to the grocery store

or using the lower level like a pantry, you need more cabinets.” I mull over Carolyn’s words. We do make a pretty large family with all five of us, and I sure don’t want to go grocery shopping a few days a week.

“I wouldn’t do anything major.” Linda scrunches up her nose. “Keep the sink and the stove where they are, so you don’t have to worry about moving any of the plumbing or wiring. You have enough space where you could even have a small island.” She walks over and traces out a small area with her hands indicating what she means.

“If you opened up the doorway, it would make it feel much more spacious,” Carolyn suggests, gesturing toward the living room area.

“It’s not that simple, we’d have to find out if that’s a load bearing wall, and possibly reinforce it before making any renovations like that,” Milo chimes in.

“I do like that idea though,” Ares comments, walking over to stand in the doorway and looking in both directions.

“Let’s draw it out.” Ollie hops down from the counter. “Anybody got anything to write with?”

“I’ll grab my bag,” Linda offers, heading toward the living room where she left it.

“How about something to write on?” Ollie adds, his voice raised so she can hear him.

“I have a receipt, but that’s it.” Linda holds up a long, narrow strip.

“We have the pizza boxes from last night.” Dante rises from the floor, his movements somehow graceful and feline.

“That would work, just the tops of the boxes,” Ares suggests. Dante jogs down the stairs, returning with two cardboard squares. The edges are jagged but it looks clean enough, not too many grease stains.

We gather around the end of the counter. Linda hands Dante a slim pen and he goes to work drawing out the shape of the room, noting where the windows and doors are.

“Sink’s about here, and the stove.” Dante stands back, letting everyone get a good look at his representation. It looks accurate to me.

Ollie places his chin on my shoulder as he considers the drawing. “I like the idea of putting in an island, especially if we can open up that wall, then we wouldn’t even really need a table, we hardly ever use one anyway.”

Dante makes a few X’s where the wall is, showing how much to open it up.

“If we extend the cabinets all the way along this wall, it would add a lot of storage.” Milo traces his finger along the cardboard.

“We’ll need to allow for a larger fridge and possibly stove too, these are ancient,” Ollie adds.

“That we can do when we decide on the actual cabinets, this is just a rough estimate.” Dante makes a few more adjustments, his head tilting left and right as he studies his work. “Island would be best here.” He makes a fairly large rectangle opposite the stove.

“Laura, anything you can think of you’d want to add?” Ares questions.

“Maybe a dishwasher, and a microwave?” I don’t even know how I’d get along without a microwave and I’ve already gotten used to the convenience of the washer.

“Definitely,” Dante mutters and makes a square above the stove to have one built in like the one they have at Rosa’s house. “Where should the dishwasher go?”

“Close to the sink,” Linda informs him.

“Here, or here?” Dante points to either side of where the sink is.

“I would say there, but it’s your kitchen.” Carolyn then points to the rectangular shape for the island. “You could even put it here.”

“Any preference?” Ares steps in a little closer to me, Ollie is still looming over my shoulder.

“Not really, as long as we have one,” I answer honestly.

“What about adding something over here? If we don’t have a table, won’t it will feel off balance if it’s too empty over here?” Dante uses the end of the pen to point at the area near the stairs to the lower level. “We could do lower cabinets for more storage, and it would balance it out more.”

“Looks good, now what kind of flooring are we thinking for down here?” Ares turns and glances around. The living room floor is covered in a dark burgundy carpet, and you can see patterns of heavy wear. A silver bar connects to the kitchen flooring as it changes over to some kind of light tile, and much like the carpet, it looks worn. The grout lines are darker in some areas and lighter in others.

“I say hardwood on this whole floor, even the master. We can always add rugs and stuff if it gets chilly, but our bed will take up most of that room as it is,” Ollie answers, removing his chin from my shoulder. He was getting heavy anyway.

“Agreed,” Milo chimes in.

I have a second where I'm embarrassed about them talking about our bed with their moms here, but it doesn't last long. It's not like it's a secret.

"Probably have to use the upstairs bedrooms like closets." Ares's eyes narrow in thought. "Unless we do something downstairs, we could make the laundry room like a big closet. That way we aren't losing the extra bedrooms if someone needs a break." Ares's eyes land on mine, and heat rises in my cheeks then.

"Speaking of that, I don't like how you can come from the garage and right into the house. I think we should close off the area at the bottom of the stairs. Make a real entrance, maybe a mudroom. We would lose some of the garage, but we don't really need it anyway," Milo suggests and settles back against the counter. He is the last one I would expect to want to change the basement. I know he likes the area down there for a gym.

"Seems like a simple enough fix," Ollie agrees, and clapping his hands together he adds, "Now that we have a game plan, we'll need to find a contractor that can get started right away."

"I know someone, I've worked with him before. He's from our community so that won't be an issue. I'll also have some of my team here to install a security system." Ares folds his arms over his chest, his eyes scanning the room like he's already planning.

"Well sounds like you guys have a good handle on things." Carolyn picks up her bag from the counter. "We'll get out of here. We'll still see you tomorrow for dinner, right?"

"Yeah, Mom said to be there at two," Dante replies. I almost forgot tomorrow is Thanksgiving. We've had so much going on lately between the house and the party Saturday to announce our Infinity. A storm of butterflies fills my stomach when I think about how fast it's approaching.

Carolyn and Linda say their goodbyes, quick kisses and hugs all round, before leaving out the front door.

"I'm hungry, are we going out to eat, or just picking something up to bring back here?" Not surprisingly it's Dante asking, he's always hungry.

"Let's get out of here for a little while. I want to sit down and eat." Ollie looks around the empty kitchen.

I glance down at my oversized t-shirt and jeans. I hope they aren't going some place nice. "We can check out the downtown area, see if anything looks good. We'll need to find some new places," Milo adds, leaning against the wall.

“Sounds good, ready?” Ares looks at me.

“Should I change?” Not that I have much to change into, but at least it wouldn’t be paint splattered and sweaty.

“No, you’re fine,” Ares assures me. I look him over, noting that he has a few speckles of paint dotted on his shirt too.

Milo locks the front door and we all head downstairs to the garage. We load into Ares’s SUV, with me in the back between Dante and Ollie, and Milo and Ares up front. The drive to the closest town takes us in the opposite direction from Canton. In less than ten minutes we come to a small downtown area. Several stores line either side of the street. There are a few restaurants and antique stores, along with a coffee shop and bakery. Ares continues down the road where a few older homes line the street. Going a little farther, I see the more modern part of the town—fast-food restaurants, chain stores, and a couple of gas stations.

“What do you think, anything look good?” Ares asks.

“There was a Mexican place back there.” Dante leans forward to look out the front window.

“That pizza place looks okay too.” Milo points at an unfamiliar sign promising the *best pizza in town*.

I’m just relieved they aren’t picking a place where we’ll stand out like a sore thumb because we look like art school rejects.

“I’m fine with either,” Ollie adds, not helping.

“Let’s make another pass and we can park, then decide.” Ares pulls into the gas station and makes a loop, exiting to drive back in the same direction we just came from.

“Oh look, Chinese. I hope they have good takeout.” I turn to look quickly at the shopping mall pushed back from the main road that Ollie was looking at.

“There’s a spot.” Milo points up ahead to an available spot in the historic part of town along the road. I wince, thinking I wouldn’t even attempt to parallel park this truck.

Ares glides past the spot and reverses in like it’s the simplest thing on the planet. No one but me reacts. “You will definitely have to teach me that. I’ve never even tried to parallel park.” Not that it was an option in the motor home anyway.

Ollie climbs out of the driver’s side and closes the door after him, while Dante reaches back in for my hand after he exits the passenger side. I step out

to the bricked sidewalk in front of a tax preparation company.

In the distance I hear the hum of music playing. Without any real direction, we walk toward the center of town. There's a large white gazebo stationed on a triangle of property, making up a park like setting with benches and trees all around.

"Well, this is cute as hell, am I right?" Ollie jumps up on a short retaining wall and balances, walking foot in front of foot, his arms splayed wide.

"The Mayberry vibe is a little strong," Milo comments, looking around. There are a few people exiting a candle shop across the street, each with small handled bags. A few people look in our direction but leave us to explore.

"There's the place I was talking about." Dante points to a colorful restaurant across the street. Through the large windows I can see several people sitting at big round tables.

"I could go for some tacos, let's give it a try," Ollie concedes, forgoing the pizza.

Milo leads our group to the sidewalk and he touches the pole so the crosswalk will alert us when we can cross.

We wait through the lights. The traffic flows in four directions, but there's a special light for the left turn, so it takes longer than usual. I feel like everyone that passes watches our group, it's probably just in my head, but I step a little closer to Milo's back so I'm not as easily visible.

Eventually a beep sounds, and the light indicates we should cross. The restaurant is on the corner of the building, and there are two wide doors between the large windows painted in a turquoise patina. Dante reaches the door first, holding it open for all of us as we pass through.

There's no real hostess area, so we step right into the dining space. Our group is large enough that we have to stand close to one another to fit between the tables when Dante enters, and the door closes behind him.

"Cozy," Ollie mutters under his breath.

"We have seating upstairs. You guys are welcome to head up, someone will be right with you," a boy around our age, with sun-kissed skin and dark hair, calls from the back of the restaurant. Ares winds us through the tables until we reach a wide set of steep stairs over on the left. The wall is made of exposed brick, and there are a few pictures on the wall, nothing really notable as we make our way up.

The upper floor is setup more like a bar with booths lining the walls, a

pool table in the middle, and a dartboard near the bar that runs along the back wall. We find a larger round table empty near the pool table and take a seat.

The boy from downstairs follows us up moments after we sit, with several tall menus in his hands. “Hey, I’m Nico.” He gives us each a menu. “Can I start you with something to drink, an appetizer?”

“Chips and queso,” Dante tells him before even looking at the menu.

“Got it, did you want salsa too?” Nico asks.

“Yes, mild and hot if you have it,” Milo replies.

“Drinks?” The waiter looks at me first.

“Water for me.” I respond, and he goes around the rest of the table collecting the guys’ drink orders.

“Okay, those chips and drinks will be right up.” Nico goes to the bar at the back and leans over the counter. The woman behind it nods her head a few times. Then he disappears down another set of stairs in the back.

“What ya getting, Muenster?”

I glance down at the laminated sheet for the first time. “I don’t know yet, you?”

“Tacos,” Ollie tells me, wrapping his arm around the back of my chair to look at my menu.

“I think I want nachos.” I purse my lips, still looking just in case something else jumps out at me.

“Nachos sound good,” Dante rumbles across the table.

The waiter returns, holding a tray with two baskets of chips and several smaller black bowls. The woman behind the bar grabs a tray with our drinks and follows him over.

He places our appetizers in the center of the table. The woman holds up my drink saying, “Water,” then looking around. I raise my hand. She does the same with the other drinks until her tray is empty.

“Do you need more time or are we ready to order?”

“I’m ready,” I answer.

“What’s good?” Milo looks at the guy.

Nico makes a face and sucks in through his teeth. “I like the fajitas, the steak and shrimp are amazing. But the combo plate is good if you’re extra hungry.”

“I’ll go with the fajitas,” Milo tells him, placing his menu on the table.

“I’ll have super nachos, and the combo plate,” Dante chimes in.

“Nachos for me too.” I raise my hand like a kid at school waiting to be

called on.

“And you?” The waiter looks at Ollie.

“Tacos, chicken.”

“Steak fajitas for me,” Ares answers last.

The waiter picks up the menus I’ve stacked and gives us a small smile.

“Won’t be too long.”

Dante reaches for the chips before the waiter even turns to leave. The guys don’t waste anytime digging right in. I have a chip or two, but since I’m having nachos, I don’t have too many.

“Do you know if anyone else besides our families are coming tomorrow?” Ollie leans his head back and drops a chip in his mouth.

“Knowing Mom, half the community will be there.” Ares delves through the basket looking for a chip.

“Ugh, I hope not. Not to be an asshole, but we have to play hosts this weekend,” Ollie continues.

Our food arrives fairly quickly, and the conversations fall as we all dig in. I’ll admit mine was delicious.

CHAPTER 21

“Aren’t we supposed to bring something?” We’re just about to enter from the side door like usual.

“No,” Dante replies. “Even if we weren’t in the middle of moving, we wouldn’t need to bring anything.”

“We can next time if you want,” Ares suggests. I nod, thinking I would like to next time, but accepting that they’ll understand why we didn’t today.

Ollie steps through the door first and he moves forward so we can enter behind him. Turning so he’s facing our group, he leans in and whispers. “The contractor is coming early tomorrow. I say we use that as an excuse to get out of here early. There were a lot of cars in the driveway.”

“Agreed,” Milo adds quickly. I almost let out a sigh of relief. I thought I had a couple more days before I had to meet a whole bunch of people.

Mal pokes his head into the mudroom, his lips twisted up in a sly grin. “I heard that,” he singsongs and ducks away just as quickly.

“Damn it,” Ares curses.

“He won’t say anything, he just wants to make us sweat,” Dante offers.

“Let’s hope not, if he tells Mom, she’ll have a fit.” Ares places his hand on the small of my back. He’s in his customary suit pants, button-up shirt, and vest. He looks amazing, delectable, but I feel like I come up lacking next to him in my sweater and jeans.

“We better go out there and make sure he doesn’t say anything,” Milo urges, pushing us out of the mudroom.

Ares leans down and whispers in my ear, “Stay close to one of us while we’re here.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” I mutter under my breath, thinking

today might be a good day to be invisible.

Milo and Ollie are leading the group as we make our way past the kitchen and into the formal living room. I spot Scott and Carolyn first, they're chatting with a woman and two men I've never seen before near the wall. Carolyn is smiling and their conversation seems relaxed.

Ollie walks over in their direction, placing a kiss on his mom's cheek when she notices him. He stands there and nods as the people his parents are talking to start to include him in the conversation. He looks over in me, my hand in Ares's, and he pulls a face.

I rub my cheek against Ares's arm to hide my smile. Thank goodness no one is making a big deal about our arrival.

Milo migrates over to one of his dads, greeting him with a hand on his back. Ares squeezes my hand and leads me over to a small bar set against the wall, keeping my hand in his as he pours himself a short glass of amber liquid. I glance around to see where Dante is, but he's not in the room. My eyes skip over a few people and I notice that some of them are watching us. Some are trying not to make it obvious, but others don't bother to hide their interest.

I turn back around pretending not to notice, but I lean in closer to Ares. "People are staring," I say under my breath.

"They won't come over." He doesn't keep his voice down. He turns back around and levels his gaze on the room. Every eye in the room is now directed elsewhere. He leans down and places a kiss on the top of my head. "They won't bother us." He pulls back and gives me a devastatingly handsome grin. "Why do you think they agreed to let you stay with me?"

"I didn't realize they even discussed it," I tell him honestly.

Ares's smile doesn't falter. "Do you really think they want to be playing the distraction instead of being here with you?"

I look over at Ollie, who looks about as bored as he could be, then over at Milo. "They're talking to their parents."

"No, they are answering all the questions about us so we don't have to." I look again, Milo is speaking, his head nodding, with a plastic smile on his lips.

"Well, that's not far. They shouldn't have to do that alone." I take a step forward.

Ares stops me, holding my hand tightly. "They don't mind Laura."

"But you just said... and Ollie looks miserable."

“Let me put it this way, they would rather it be them than you.”

I look up at Ares. His face is more closed off than I’ve seen it in weeks and his posture is stiff. “How did you get stuck with me?”

He chuckles under his breath, but outwardly his features don’t shift. “Sweetheart, I’m the one keeping them away.” He pauses, and his next words stun me. “These people only pretend not to fear me.”

My heart aches at his declaration, which was delivered harshly. I look out at the people milling around the room, seeing them in a different light. A wave of fierce protectiveness crashes into me. His words may sound like he’s angry, but I can sense the hurt underneath.

With a subtle movement I go from clinging to him, to standing a little in front of him. I dare one of these people to treat him with anything other than kindness.

“Laura, how are you darling? Ares,” Rosa calls, coming into the room with her arms already outstretch as she approaches. She gives me a quick kiss on my cheek and moves to Ares’s other side. There’s something about the way she is speaking, just a little too loudly, and the way she’s standing, that makes me think she’s doing exactly what I am. Protecting the most powerful of our kind. Her eyes land on mine and she gives me a wink of understanding.

“Dinner is just about ready. If everyone would like to follow me.” Ares guides me from the room, while his mother waits for everyone else to rise from the seats and gather near her. I look back as we leave the room, and almost every eye is on us.

Dante meets us near the formal dining room, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his dark jeans. “Hey, were there a lot of people in there?”

“Some,” Ares answers noncommittally. I reach for Dante’s arm with my free hand, not liking the frown marring his brow. I think back to when Ares had taken me to meet Dante’s tiger for the first time, how nervous they both were for me to see him in his shifted form. I don’t think it was an accident that Dante didn’t follow us into the room. How long has Ares been taking on the brunt of their shared unacceptance?

A new resolve falls over me, I don’t give a shit what these people think of me, but I’ll be damned if they’ll ever make any of my men feel like freaks because they’re afraid of them, and how powerful they are. A static charge fills my blood, making my hair swirl into the air as if carried by a current.

Ares freezes, halting before we reach the dining room. “Laura?” His

reaction is enough to tell me I need to cool it before going into the dining room.

I take a few deep breaths. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Dante whispers. "If you need a minute, we can go to the room."

"We don't want anyone knowing the extent of your abilities yet," Ares cautions.

"I said I'm fine." A little misplaced anger seeps into my tone. I pull my hands free from Ares and Dante and shake them out, dispelling a little of the static energy collection on my skin. "Sorry." I gentle my voice.

"No one here is going to hurt you," Ares tells me, completely misjudging my unease.

I make a sarcastic scoffing sound. "That's not what's bothering me. I don't like the way these people look at you."

A throat clears and I turn to see a couple of people from the living room that were staring at us. They have the nerve to look at me with upturned noses.

Rosa makes her way to the front of the group, a small frown marring her features since she missed the exchange. "Everything all right?"

I bite my teeth together to keep from speaking out. Instead, I give her a tight smile and nod my head. "Fine."

Milo and Ollie walk past the growing group of people to come to our side. As I turn away to head to the dining room, I catch a glimpse of Ares's face. His features are hard, and shadows dance across his cheeks as he tilts his chin down to stare at the group behind us. Not a word is spoken, but the threat is clear.

I feel guilty that I started this, that they are seeing him for what they fear, since now he's going all Dark Lord on them. I reach for his arm, pulling him so he'll turn. He does so, reluctantly. In the next second, I offer my hand to Dante. Milo and Ollie form a wall behind us as we finally reach our destination.

Rosa keeps casting suspicious glances at her guests, while the rest of their parents, clueless to the brief encounter, carry on light conversations while everyone is filling their plates with food. The dining room isn't quite large enough for all of us, so there are a few tables set up in the kitchen and living room. Our group snags one of the tables in the living room, away from most of the guests' prying eyes.

“Still at the designated kiddie table,” Ollie snickers, and I look over to see that the table closest to us is, in fact, a kiddie table. Several children, ranging in age from seven to about sixteen if I had to guess, sit there looking supremely bored.

“Works for me.” Milo settles in his seat. “What happened in the hallway?” He lowers his voice to just above a whisper.

“It was me,” I confess, before Ares or Dante can make an excuse. “I got a little sparky. While they were trying to calm me down, a couple of the people heard me say I didn’t like the way they looked at Ares.” I rub my fingers over the tablecloth, not meeting anyone’s eyes.

“Good.” Ollie snorts and drops his plate to the table. “Half those assholes talk shit, but they’re just fucking scared. They wouldn’t know what to do with half the power he has.” He scoops up his fork and digs into his food like it’s no big deal.

The rest of the guys begin to eat, so I take my cue from them and drop the subject, picking at the food I put on my plate. Everything looks and smells delicious, but with the way my stomach is feeling, I’m not sure I really want to eat very much.

Dante is the first to notice my lack of interest. “You need to eat.” He pushes my plate closer to me using the end of his fork. His eyes stay on mine until I place a bite of sweet potatoes into my mouth. He makes a grunting noise and returns to his overflowing plate.

“How soon do you think we can get out of here?” Milo asks before he’s even done eating.

“I think we should just sneak out, make a couple plates to take home. No one would say anything. Besides, your mom looked like she was about ready to kick everyone out. Did you see the way she was eyeballing Frank?” Ollie shakes his head with a smirk on his lips. Dante lets out a low chuckle in response.

“I don’t know why you guys never told her the way those people treated you, you know she would have kicked their asses herself,” Ollie continues, sounding baffled.

“I’ve never cared what they think about me.” Ares looks over at Dante quickly, a tick working in his jaw. “I let it go because some of them are their real friends. I also know that it is literally fear that makes them wary of us.”

“They aren’t bad people,” Dante agrees.

“I guess,” Ollie concedes, but he doesn’t sound like he agrees with them.

“I’m going to grab a soda, anyone want anything?” Milo stands.

“I’ll take one.” Ollie points his finger in the air.

“I’ll have a water, if you don’t mind.” I meet his gaze.

He nods. “Ares, Dante?”

Ares rattles the two ice cubes left in his short glass. “I’m good.”

“Nah,” Dante mumbles around a mouthful. When he swallows, he adds, “I’m about to get up for more anyway.”

Milo walks over to the kitchen where he opens the fridge. “Hey honey,” Linda calls, walking into the kitchen from the other room.

“Hey Ma,” he greets her, retrieving a bottle of water from the fridge.

“So, that’s the plan, right? Grab more food and get the hell out of here?” Ollie pulls my attention back to the table.

“We’ll see. We would have to at least say goodbye, I haven’t even really seen the guys yet.” Ares pushes his plate away, clearly done. I reach over and snag his uneaten roll. Ollie’s hand lands on mine. I look up and narrow my eyes on him.

“You already had one,” I accuse. “Plus, I got to it first.” I widen my eyes at his hand on top of mine.

A wave of heat blisters over my hand, but it doesn’t hurt, it’s more of a caress, then he pulls back, giving me a saucy wink. “I can get another, I just didn’t want it to go to waste. By all means, enjoy.”

I drag my prize back to my plate, thinking he gave up way too easily. “Eat the bread, *Cara*,” Ares demands when I don’t look away from Ollie. He snickers at me like I just got in trouble. I rip off a big chunk and shove it in my mouth.

“You’re so cute.” Ollie scrunches up his nose at me, grinning.

“You should have seen her in the hallway, she looked like she wanted to pick her teeth with Frank’s bones before Mamma came over.” Dante has a wistful smile on his lips, his eyes unfocused like he’s thinking back.

“Mom said no one is expecting us to stay long.” Milo places my bottle of water in front of me, and hands Ollie a can of cola.

“Let me get a refill first.” Dante stands and goes over to the kitchen.

“I want to make a plate to go, nothing will be open later and I know we’ll all be hungry.” Milo doesn’t even bother to sit down; he joins Dante in the kitchen again.

Ares sighs, but he stands up too, extending his hand down to me. “Make a plate, we’ll get out of here and go home to relax.” My heart does a little flip-

flop when he says *home*. “What are you smiling at?” He gathers both of my hands and wraps them around my back, pressing our bodies together. I’m forced to tilt my head back to look up at him.

“Nothing, going home just sounds good. Home.” A giddy giggle erupts from me. Ares leans in and plants a kiss on my lips even though I’m still smiling, and I kiss him back.



“You need to be at the venue at eleven o’clock.” This isn’t the first time Rosa has mentioned the time we need to be there. She has her hand folded over Dante’s elbow. We all already said goodbye to the others. It took longer than I expected, but making sure we said bye to all ten of their parents wasn’t as easy as you’d think. First, we had to find them, and then they wanted to chat for a few minutes.

Rosa followed us out from the kitchen, placed a covered tray in my hands, and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. “I saved these for you and the boys, I hope you like them.”

“Cannoli?” Dante sounds hopeful.

“I didn’t make them,” Rosa cautions, “but they’re good.” Dante reaches for the tray. Rosa swats his hand before he can get close enough to lift the lid off. “Wait until you get home. They’re for everybody.” She knows him too well, he would probably eat them all before we got home. He grumbles but doesn’t try again.

“We won’t be by tomorrow. We have a few last-minute things to take care of for Saturday. You need to—”

“Be there by eleven,” Ares cuts her off.

“Okay, okay. Go home. I love you all.” Rosa pouts a little. “Love you too,” is chorused back to her from the group. I’m not one of them, I’m not there yet.

CHAPTER 22

“*T*here are a bunch of sales for Black Friday, we should get a TV or two.” Ollie is lounging back on the bed, his phone in his hands. “I wish we could get some furniture.” His finger scrolls up the screen.

We’ve been home for a few hours. I’m sitting on the floor cross-legged, while Milo and Ollie are close together on the bed, both looking at the phone.

“Wait, what about that one.” Milo reaches over and touches the phone screen.

Ollie whistles. “That’s big.”

“That’s what she said,” Milo quips without even cracking a smile.

Ollie snickers. “Ares!” he shouts without giving any warning.

Milo pushes him to the side. “That was right in my ear.”

“That’s what she said.” Ollie busts out laughing at his own joke. Milo just rolls his eyes.

“What?” Ares enters the doorframe, his hair still damp from his shower.

When Ollie stops cackling, he tilts his head back and looks at Ares. “Can I have your debit card?”

“For what?” Ares crosses his arms over his chest, the sleeves of his dark gray shirt tightening over his biceps.

“Just a TV or two,” Ollie says innocently.

Ares narrows his eyes on him skeptically. “Don’t order too much shit Oliver. Or you’ll be the one finding a place to put it when the construction starts,” Ares warns.

“I won’t, I promise. Just a couple TV’s and maybe a place to sit, even if

it's temporary. I'm tired of lying in bed all the time."

Ares jerks his head. "My wallet is downstairs on the counter." Ollie jumps up and Milo bounces on the bed, tipping over.

"It's not like it's going to magically appear once you order it, what's the hurry?" Milo grumbles re-situating himself on the bed.

Ares follows Ollie out of the room. I climb up on the bed and settle in next to Milo. He takes his arm from behind his head and lifts it so I can scoot in closer. I lay my palm over his upper stomach and my head on his chest. There's nothing soft about Milo, but I still love being next to him. "I think he'd have the whole house furnished in an hour if it was possible."

"Agreed," Milo says, his voice echoing under my ear.

"Oh, I see how it is." Ollie bounces onto the bed on his butt, Ares's slim wallet clutched in one hand, his phone in the other. "You wait for me to leave and then you get all cuddly? Well, good thing I don't mind being the third wheel." I tilt my head back and look up at Milo, we make eye contact then he rolls his eyes at Ollie's antics.

Ollie snuggles in close behind me, curling around my back. His hands now empty and reaching over me to land low on Milo's stomach.

Milo makes a grunting noise in response. He bites his bottom lip, his eyes searching mine. I don't wait for him to decide to kiss me; I lean forward and place my lips on his. It's not often we find ourselves alone—well, just the three of us anyway.

Milo leaves his one arm behind his head, holding himself back I'm sure. I feel the way his abdominal muscles tighten as he curls forward into my kiss. Ollie moves right along with me, his arm moving over my waist. He plants a few kisses on the back of my neck. My heart rate easily triples being between him.

Milo opens his mouth, the tip of his tongue teasing me with soft sweeps against mine. I inch farther up his body, my hand gripping his shirt. He shudders out a breath and I pull back, seeing his eyes squeezed tightly together.

It's maddening how in control he always is. I want to see his resolve shatter. Feel his heavy hands crush my body to his while he's kissing me. I dip back in, running the tip of my tongue across the seam of his lips. "Milo," I whisper between kisses, "do you want me to stop?"

"Laura, don't stop," Ollie mutters from behind me. "Milo, you need this, we need this." I pull back anyway. There's no way I would force him to do

anything he wasn't ready for.

"There's no hurry Milo, I'm not going anywhere."

Milo's nostrils flare as he pushes out a heavy breath. "I don't want to hurt you, either of you," comes his pain filled reply. He slams his head back against his hand and the pillow beneath it.

"You aren't going to hurt anyone Milo, I wish you'd just trust yourself." Ollie doesn't hide the frustration in his words.

"You don't know that. I could break her bones if I squeezed her too hard. How would I live with myself after that? Hell, Ares and Dante would probably kill me anyways."

Ollie groans, his forehead tapping on the center of my back. "Milo, you haven't hurt anyone since you first manifested, and that was an accident."

"Stop talking about it like it was someone else Ollie, it was you. I hurt you."

"Only because I hadn't come into my abilities yet Milo. I promise you wouldn't hurt me now, you're just too afraid to even try."

I'm still between them, and both of their words come as a shock. No wonder Milo is so cautious. I never knew he hurt Ollie.

"We're part of the same Infinity Milo. Our powers are not effective on each other. The only exception would be Dante, and that's only because when he shifts he's a real fucking tiger. Your strength, my fire, it can't hurt either of us, or Laura."

It's definitely not the first time they've had this conversation.

"I'm scared!" Milo shouts, his hand flying out from behind his head as he shakes his fist in the air. "You don't know what that was like, I ruptured your fucking spleen and we were just goofing off. You had to have surgery."

"And I never once blamed you Milo, none of us ever blamed you. And as you can see, I'm fine. But you have been punishing yourself ever since." Ollie sits up. "You play football like it's a fucking trial of not using your strength, just so you can make sure you have control over that part of yourself."

I pull away from Milo, not wanting to be between them anymore. I don't like that they're fighting. I can't believe their raised voices haven't brought Ares or Dante up here.

As soon as I sit up Milo does as well, punching his fist into the bed as he does. "You don't know that, nothing about our group is normal. And your

ability could hurt us—if you caught the house on fire, we would all burn Ollie. There are always exceptions to the rule.”

“Jesus.” Ollie shakes his head in disbelief. “Yeah, and if you knocked down a wall and the roof fell in, that might hurt us too. But that’s not what I’m talking about Milo, and you know it.”

I ease toward the end of the bed, completely uncomfortable with the conflict. My mother and I rarely ever fought. I always did as expected, and she’s never been a yeller. I don’t know what to do, or how to help de-escalate the situation. Should I go get Ares, or Dante?

“You want to know what I know?” Milo pauses. “I know it’s not fucking worth it to risk it.”

“Oh, but you can knock heads with a whole football team?” Ollie’s face is drawn tight, his eyes fiercely narrowed on Milo. I could probably sneak out of the room without them even noticing. I take a step toward the door.

Milo throws his hands in the air. “Because I don’t give a shit about anyone on that field. I don’t have to worry about losing control. This,” Milo gestures to me, proving he does in fact still know I’m here, then jabs his finger in Ollie’s direction, “makes me fucking crazy, I feel like I’m going to Hulk out. I can’t control my emotions with you two, either of you.”

“You are the only one that thinks you always need to be in control. Isn’t that what being in an Infinity is about? Having our abilities under control? Especially, now that we have Laura?” Some anger melts out of Ollie’s voice, leaving him sounding drained and disappointed.

Milo opens his mouth like he might continue to argue, but Dante interrupts him, “That’s enough.” That’s all he says, two simple words.

My arms are crossed over my stomach as he walks over to me and wraps his arm around my back, guiding me from the room. Instead of watching where we’re going, he’s looking over his shoulder watching Ollie and Milo.

As soon as we’re downstairs, Dante takes a hold of my shoulders and looks at me. “Sorry we let that go on for so long with you there. We thought maybe this time it would be different.” Dante gives a shrug, his lips twisting.

“Yeah, it didn’t seem like the first time they had that conversation. It’s okay, I just didn’t know what to say or do to help.”

“There’s nothing any of us can do. Milo will have to face his fear at some point. It would be better for everyone if that was sooner, rather than later,” Ares adds. I glance around Dante and see him sitting in a folding lawn chair,

his laptop perched on his knees.



“You don’t need to get dressed here, we’ll get dressed at the venue,” Ollie informs me, pulling my garment bag out of the mostly empty closet.

“You’re already dressed,” I note, looking over his tartan patterned slacks and dark button-up shirt. He looks amazing, trendy, and hip. Ollie’s hair is pulled back, showing off the perfect symmetry of his face.

His light green eyes are dancing as he tells me, “Yeah, but I’m not getting my hair done and shit.”

“Ah, what?” I place my hands on my hips, this is the first I’ve heard of this nonsense.

“Please don’t be mad. Our moms wanted to do all the girly shit together.” Ollie gives me puppy dog eyes, his full lips in a sweet pout.

“I could punch you,” I growl, even though it’s clearly not true. I’d be more prone to kiss him than anything else.

He lets a small smirk form on his mouth, but schools his features quickly. “You’re breaking my heart, Muenster.” He actually holds his hand over his chest and has the nerve to pretend to sniffle.

“I’m gonna break something,” I grouse under my breath.

“You love me,” Ollie singsongs, proving he knows I wouldn’t do anything to hurt him.

“Why didn’t you tell me this earlier? I could have... I don’t know, prepared?” Now I’m the one pouting.

“The only thing you would have done would be freak out,” Ollie argues, his brows rising, daring me to challenge him. “It’s just some hair and makeup.” He at least looks apologetic when he delivers the rest of the news.

“Oliver,” I grit out.

He flees with my dress bag, not even looking back. “Leaving in five,” he calls over his shoulder as he makes his escape.

I continue to grumble under my breath, snatching my shoebox from the floor. “What if I don’t want my hair and makeup done, huh? Nobody even

bothered asking me.”

“Then tell them no, *Cara*.” I look over and find Ares leaning against the doorframe. I take a minute to admire him. Wearing brown, distressed looking wingtip shoes and his legs crossed at the ankle, the hem of his maroon pants sit at the exact perfect length and fit. With the way he’s leaning I can see how well the pants fit across his backside. My gaze slides farther up, seeing a matching maroon jacket. The color looks amazing against his tanned skin, especially with his dark features. I can just make out the cuffs of his black button-down peeking out of his sleeves where his hands are balled into loose fists at his sides. Higher still, I note the top few buttons of his shirt are open, revealing his thick neck and a small bit of scruff along his jaw. Damn if he isn’t gorgeous.

His tawny brown eyes study me, and a flush steals over my cheeks as I bite the inside of my lip. Ares is like a dangerous secret everyone is dying to know. I swallow, trying to recall what he said. “I can’t tell them no, that would be bitchy.”

“You certainly can tell them no, I’ll tell them for you if you wish,” he states matter-of-factly.

I blow out a pent-up breath. “No, it’s okay. I’ve just never had it done before. It’s probably for the best, I have no idea how to do makeup.”

Pushing off the wall, Ares heads in my direction. I stand my ground, even though I’m tempted to take a step back. Ares getting close to me looking the way he does is not a good idea, especially when we’re supposed to be leaving soon.

“Tell them no if it’s something you don’t like.” He tilts his chin down and stares into my eyes.

“I will.” My voice is low, nearly a whisper.

“Good.” He places a chaste kiss on my temple after grabbing the back of my neck and pulling me toward him.

I’m still leaning in when he releases me and turns to exit the room, leaving me with scrambled thoughts and a desire to rub against him like a cat. “You can do this.” I give myself one last pep talk before heading out of the room and down the stairs into our empty main level.

The guys’ footsteps echo as they mill about in the kitchen. I see Milo first, he’s tugging on the sleeve of a soft gray jacket. “Holy fuck, I just had this fitted, and it’s too tight.” He lifts his elbows, showing how constricted his movements are.

“Dude, you’re bulking up like crazy,” Ollie acknowledges.

“I’m not doing anything. I haven’t even been hitting the gym.” Milo sounds incredulous.

“It’s Laura,” Ares tells him. “You haven’t bonded with her so your abilities are growing, but she’s not filtering them. What did you expect to happen?”

I step down on the next riser hard enough that they know I’m there. I’m not ready for another fight with Milo about bonding.

Dante pokes his head out of the living room. He’s eyes flash almost orange when he sees me. He continues around the wall and my mouth goes dry. Dante’s hair is mussed up in the front, falling across his forehead. There is some very short, but very masculine stubble above his lip, and across his chin and jaw. My fingers actually wiggle with the need to feel it.

His fitted, short-sleeved dark blue shirt is open at the neck with several buttons left undone, revealing his smooth skin. I’ve rarely seen Dante in anything but t-shirts, but now his shirt is tucked into a dark pair of jeans, which are cuffed at the bottom, showing off a heavy pair of black boots. The gleam of his black metal belt buckle catches my eye as he saunters over.

Dante dips his head low as he nears, giving me his customary greeting of a head bump, but his nuzzle doesn’t end there, his lips are near my ear as he makes a low growling sound in his chest. The stubble peppered on his jaw that I was longing to touch, grazes against my cheek, and I shiver.

In a flash I reach up and grab his face. Yanking it down to mine, my lips land on his biting and teasing. His large body softens at my touch, yielding to my demand.

My jaw aches and I know what’s happening, but I don’t try to stop it. As I push my tongue into Dante’s mouth, I feel the harsh points on a few of my teeth elongating. I force myself to release his face in fear that my nails would score his skin. Instead, I let my palms glide down his chest until I wrap my fingers into the top of his pants. I jerk him closer to me, our pelvises joined. I feel his hardness pressing against me and a feral growl escapes my chest.

“I’ll go start the car,” Milo offers, breaking through the animalistic fog threatening to overwhelm me. I slow my savage kisses and soften my lips as I release his pants from my grip. He makes a gentle sound, almost a plea, when I pull my lips from his completely.

“I’ll take two, please.” Ollie lets out a low whistle.

“Shut up,” Dante barks, his voice harsh.

I open my eyes slowly to see the fading tiger markings disappearing from my skin, no longer worried I could cut him, I reach up and palm his cheek again. The stiffness in his posture melts immediately.

“Sorry.” I wince, even though I’m not sorry for kissing him, just the way I went about it.

Dante crowds in really closely, his lips brushing against my ear, and he growls, “I can’t wait until you know you don’t need to apologize to me, not for that. Take what you need. I love it.” I swallow a thick lump in my throat, almost panting when he pulls away.

CHAPTER 23

I lift my hand when a young woman with artfully applied cat-eye liner picks up a bottle of foundation and a pink makeup sponge. “Rosa,” I call, she’s seated two chairs down from me. Another woman behind her is curling her dark hair.

“Yes,”

“I really don’t want too much makeup, is that okay?” I wince, my hair already feels stiff and tacky, and I do not want my face feeling like that after plastering a bunch of goop all over it.

“*Assolutamente*, none, some. Whatever you like,” Rosa answers, waving her hand about easily.

Focusing on the makeup artist again, I tell her, “How about some mascara, maybe some lip gloss.”

“If you’re sure,” she replies like she thinks I’m making a mistake. I wonder, not for the first time, if this girl is like me, a synergist, or is she a norm?

We’re in a hotel room that’s been setup like a salon with three chairs. The stylists each have a large rolling cart, which makes me think this is something they do often. There’s some clanging at the door before a beep sounds. I turn to see Carolyn pushing through the door, a couple of bags in her hands. She looks frazzled. Linda leans forward, disrupting the girl in front of her. “Are you okay?”

“Fine, just running late.” She lets the door noisily fall shut behind her.

“There’s plenty of time, pour a glass of wine,” Rosa tells her, her eyes closed as the woman behind her brushes a section of her hair.

Ollie pokes his head out of the bedroom, where the guys have been holed

up watching TV since we got here. “Hey Ma,” he calls out. “Muenster, Ares said not to let them do anything to your face.”

I blow out a breath and the hair curling down over my shoulder doesn't even budge it has so much product in it. “Leave her alone Ollie, she can do whatever she wants.” I grin over at Carolyn as she dismisses him. She winks in response. She and Ollie are so much alike.

Undeterred, he struts out of the room, leaving the double doors open. I hear the blasts of explosions from the TV—Dante's pick, I'm sure.

“She doesn't want that gunk all over her face.” Ollie picks up a tool that looks like a small metal spatula. He eyes me, then the tool, before setting it down. The makeup artist turns to look at him for the first time after searching her cart.

She stands a little taller, her shoulders held back to push out her breasts a little. It's subtle, but I still notice. Unfortunately for her, Ollie doesn't.

“See, she looks perfect.” Ollie boops my nose with the tip of his finger.

I swat his hand away. “I already told her, just mascara and lip gloss. Tell Dante to turn the TV down.”

“Dante!” Ollie shouts while still staring at me.

“What?” Dante's deep, grumbly voice fills my ears.

I turn to face him. “You will hurt your ears, the TV is too loud.” He steps away from the door and the sound disappears.

“I didn't think it was that loud,” Dante says, coming back out of the room. “You almost done?” His eyes study me.

“Almost.” I fake some cheer in voice. “What are the other guys doing?”

“Ares is working on the computer, and Milo is pouting,” Ollie answers.

“I am not!” Milo calls from the room. Moments later he steps into the living room and his arms are folded over his chest, making him look even bigger.

I look over at the stylist when she makes a noise, she's looking over at the other stylists, her eyes wide like she can't believe what she's seeing.

“Ares, they're going to put crap on her face.” Milo looks over his shoulder. I groan, which makes Ollie chuckle. I know any second he will come out here, and probably scare the girl half to death when he goes all Dark Lord on her.

Sure enough, he stalks out the door with shadows clinging to him, even in the room flooded with light. His suit coat is off, leaving him in his fitted vest, shirt, and slacks.

The spacious room now feels small with all four of them out here staring at me. I shift in my seat, wondering if the girl is going to do my mascara or not.

“Boys, pour Carolyn a glass of wine, Laura is almost done,” Rosa announces.

“I got it Ma,” Ollie volunteers quickly. He rushes over to a small bar against the wall and fills a tall-stemmed glass with white wine, sneaking a sip off the top that all the mothers pretend not to notice. I roll my eyes.

Finally, my stylist steps up close to me. She has a small disposable mascara wand in one hand and a black tube in the other. “Okay, look up. Try not to blink.” Under her breath she adds, “Girl, I don’t know if they’re your cousins or brothers, or what, but hook a sister up.”

A husky chuckle falls from my lips, surprising me. I don’t feel an ounce of jealousy at her proclamation. “Not cousins, or brothers, just mine.” I don’t bother to keep my voice down.

“Damn.” She pauses and looks me over, then looks at the guys all hovering around the room. “Damn,” she raises her hand to give me a high five, “I’m jealous as hell, but I ain’t mad at ya.”



I’m standing in the middle of our group with Milo and Ollie on one side, and Dante and Ares on the other. We’re facing a set of double doors, about to enter the ballroom. Nervous butterflies are battling in my stomach. “Why are we going in after everyone else?”

“We have to make a splash,” Ollie pipes up grabbing my finger in front of Milo and giving them a squeeze. “Don’t worry, it’s not as big of a deal as it feels like. They’ll ooh and ah over us for a few minutes, then everyone will hit the buffet.”

“There isn’t a buffet,” I deadpan.

“Okay, the bar, they’ll hit the bar,” Ollie amends. He releases my hand and stands up to straighten his shirt and brush imaginary lint from his pants. He’s not acting like it’s not a big deal. My palms feel sweaty, but I don’t

want to wipe them on my dress. I look down, seeing my beautiful dress—if nothing else, at least I look the part.

The doors open as I look up, and I reach for Milo and Dante's hands because they're the closest to me, no longer caring if my hands are sweaty. The guys tighten their ranks around me so we're all shoulder to shoulder—well, more like shoulder to biceps in my case. The room is quiet, and I can see several round tables filled with people staring in our direction from the opening. Instinctively I want to take a step back and fall behind the guys to do what I've always done, become invisible, but I fight the need to hide.

I keep my head high and my gaze forward, but I'm not really seeing anyone. Each table, each face, blends into the next as the guys take the first step forward, bringing us closer to the entrance.

More of the ballroom is revealed with each step. There are two bars on opposite ends of the room, one near a large open space with a gleaming wooden floor, and the other standing amid a sea of large, round tables. A single clap starts, and that's all it takes for an uproarious greeting to roll through the room. I squeeze Milo and Dante's hands following their lead, but more than ready to take a seat so I won't feel so much like I'm on display.

"This is weird," I say through a plastic smile without moving my lips.

"Almost there," Dante mumbles, his lips on the top of my head. There's any empty table near a set of doors. Couldn't we have just come in there, instead of traipsing through the middle of the room? Ares pulls out a seat and Dante guides me to sit. Thankfully I'm off to the side and I don't have to look over the entire crowd. Our table is smaller, and there's only enough room for six people. I tuck myself into the chair and sit with my back ramrod straight, feeling everyone's eyes still lingering on my skin. I should have picked a different dress. It exposes my entire back.

Rosa catches my attention from the table closest to us. She's leaning on Mal's shoulder with a wide smile reaching all the way up to her watery eyes. Her familiar face soothes me, helping me feel like I'm not so very lost. All the parents are sitting with her, taking up all ten seats. Only my mom is missing. I feel a pang of loss. I wish she was here.

Light conversations build as the clapping dies when we take our seats. "What now?" My hands are tangled together in my lap, wringing with nervous tension.

"For the most part we're done." Ares takes a seat across from me.

"What do you mean most part?" I eye him skeptically.

“Well, it would be in bad taste to run off now, we still need to eat, maybe dance a little. People will expect us to mingle.” The last part he adds with a little disdain.

I lean in close to the table, and in a hushed whisper ask, “Is anyone from Leon’s family here?”

Dante raises his head and gazes over the room. “I doubt it.”

“I invited everyone we met with in Idaho, but I never heard back one way or another.” Ares picks up a fancy water goblet and takes a small sip. The cloak of shadows he wears so easily slips into place around him.

Without thought I tug on the darkness that lingers inside me, wanting that same wall of protection around me.

Milo grabs my hand in my lap. I look up and see his lips pulled in a tight smile. “You’re pulling shadows,” he warns under his breath.

“So is Ares,” I counter like a child.

“Yes, but everyone knows that Ares is a shadow walker,” Dante grumbles. “We don’t need anyone knowing you have more than one ability, so just make sure you stick to that one from now on.”

“No sparking up or going all tiger stripes. Don’t let my freak flag fly. Got it.” I reach for the glass in front of me and take a hasty sip, just for something to do.

“You’re not a freak... you’re just a little freaky. Which we all love, by the way.” Ollie tries to make a joke, but it falls flat. I groan and roll my eyes. “Seriously Laura, there is nothing wrong with you,” he amends.

“There isn’t,” Ares confirms. “Having more than one ability isn’t anything to be ashamed of. I wish there wasn’t a need to conceal your abilities, but until we find out the truth about your mom and Leon, I think it’s for the best.”

I nod, this isn’t the first time we’ve talked about this, I know their reasoning, but knowing I’m the only Synergist that has absorbed more than one of her pairs powers makes me feel a little like a freak.

A waitress approaches our table with a large, black tray held aloft in her hand, already stocked with small plates and a decanter of red liquid. I notice for the first time there’s a small silver rectangle engraved with my name in front of me.

She glances around the table and deposits a spikey green salad in front of each of us. She stands back after setting the pitcher down in the center of the table. A crisp black apron covers most of her white shirt and black pants, and

she's wearing a name tag that announces her as *Sherry*. "Can I get you anything else?" No chatter, no niceties, just down to business.

I raise a finger in the air. "Can I have a cola?" I ask hesitantly, like she might say no.

"Of course, anything else, sirs?" Sherry looks over my guys.

"What's in here?" Ollie picks up the pitcher and gives it a sniff.

"The house red sir. Would you care for something else?"

Ollie sets the wine down and pulls a face like it smelled bad. "I'll take a cola too."

"Anyone else?" Sherry pauses, looking around. "I'll be right out with those." She replies briskly, rushing off. I glance around noting each table has a designated server. *Fancy*, I think to myself, wondering how we scored the waitress with no personality.

I look down at my salad, examining all the different shades of green, from each leaf to the edamame and snap peas. Even the dressing is green.

Dante is the first to pick up his silverware. He pokes at a particularly spikey leaf and examines it as he lifts it. "This looks dangerous," he observes and shoves it into his mouth. He crunches it and makes a surprised frown while nodding. "Looks crazy but tastes good," he notes digging back in.

He bolsters my courage enough where I feel like I need to at least try it to see for myself. Looking over at his table setting, I make sure to grab the same fork he used from in front of me. I take a much smaller nibble, just in case. I don't want to have to swallow it if it's bad.

Surprisingly, citrus is the first flavor I experience. The dressing is a little creamy, balancing out the bitterness of the leaves and lemon flavor. It's not something I'll crave, but it's definitely not bad. None of the others seem to have the same reservations as I do, they dug in without complaint.

I hear the clanging of silverware over the soft music playing in the background, it's just enough to mute the conversations at the closest tables. I push my plate toward Dante after a few bites. I'm not sure my stomach will be able to handle a five-course meal.

I glance at the guys, then down at our black tablecloth, but I don't really let my gaze roam around the room. I don't want to know if everyone is still staring at us.

The waitress returns, drawing my attention, with two glasses of icy cola on her tray. "Can I take that from you, miss?" She extends her hand like she

might reach from my plate.

I snag the corner and look over at Dante. “Do you want the rest of mine sweetie?” My cheeks instantly flame as the term of endearment I’ve never once uttered slips from my lips.

Dante pauses mid bite, his eyes jumping up to meet mine. He passes his plate, not even completely empty, to the waiting girl behind him and pulls my dish closer. He examines the food that’s left, looking for the best bite I suppose. I look away, glad Ollie didn’t tease me about my slip-up, and that it didn’t seem to bother Dante.

I register a tap on my hand, and Dante has the fork raised in my direction when I peer over at him. A small leaf with an edamame bean on the end is poised and waiting. He moves his hand a little closer, angling to give me the bite.

I lean over and take the morsel from the end of his fork. “Thank you, but you have the rest,” I tell him after chewing.

Milo and Ollie are talking while eating, gossiping really, about the surrounding people. They keep their voices low enough so they don’t have to worry about being overheard, I can barely even hear them.

The chatter gets a little louder as dinner progresses, but by the time they serve the main course, you can’t even hear the low thrum of the background music playing. I’m just starting to get comfortable when I hear a throat clearing and someone gently taps a fork on a crystal glass. The ring quiets the room fairly quickly.

My gaze is drawn to the table next to us, where Rosa is standing. Her yellow gown drapes over her curves, making her look elegant and regal. She’s looking out into the crowd, waiting for everyone to acknowledge her. “I wanted to say thank you all for coming today. For sharing such a joyous day with our families.” She turns then and faces our table. Rosa brings the tips of her fingers from both hands up to her lips and kisses them, before lifting them off and sending the love in our direction.

“*Meie cari...*” She gets a little choked up when she looks at all of us. William stands and wraps his arm around her waist, pulling her close to his side. Rosa straightens her back and gives a delicate little snuffle. “Your journey hasn’t been as an easy one,” she makes eye contact with each of us individually, and Dante reaches for my hand under the table, “but seeing you all together now fills me, us,” she waves to the whole table, including all the other parents, “with such joy.” She takes a breath and her head bobs as she

swallows and reaches for a tall glass of red wine. “Vi auguro di tutto cuore che serenità, felicità e complicità vi siano compagni per tutta la vita e che il vostro futuro sia luminoso come questo giorno. Alla salute!” She tips back the glass, taking a heavy gulp, and raises it in the air. Everyone follows suit, including us as I scramble to grab my water goblet.

“What did she say?” I lean closer to Dante.

“I wish with all my heart for serenity, happiness and complicity to be your lifetime companions and for your future to be as bright as this day.” He dips his chin, laying it on the top of my head. “It’s a toast to the future.”

As Rosa sits, Linda stands. “I’ll keep it brief, I know everyone is anxious to get out on that dance floor.” A couple people laugh with her, poking fun. “You boys have been inseparable since forever. When you were younger, none of us could have imagined, hoped, that this would be your future. Laura, thank you for finding our boys, for bringing them back to us, to each other.” She nods her head quickly and wipes under her eye. “To a wonderful future.” She raises her glass then takes a sip in a toast.

I bury myself a little closer to Dante’s side, but reach for Milo’s hand. Expecting Carolyn to stand next, I look at her. She lifts her glass as she rises to her feet. “I knew you two were going to get all sappy on me.” She looks over at Rosa and Linda, her voice is a little nasally like she’s fighting tears. That gets several people laughing. Fanning her face with one hand, she faces our table.

“I’m so happy for you all.” She pauses. “I’m just going to say we love you and stop now, before we’re all blubbering.” Raising her glass she looks around, making sure everyone else raises theirs. “To love, to laughter, and happily ever afters.” I gulp down the last of my water with her toast.

Scott stands up and glides his hand over Carolyn’s back. Oh no, are all the dads toasting too? I’m going to need another drink and the bathroom soon if this keeps up. But instead of a toast, he proclaims, “Bar’s open,” with a chuckle.

CHAPTER 24

The noise in the large ballroom rises as people begin mingling around. The waitstaff is busy gathering dishes and refilling glasses, mostly unnoticed by the partygoers.

I let my back rest against the seat, finding it much more comfortable than I would have expected. The music volume rises along with the chatter of voices. Scott is the first to come over to our table, and he places his palm on the back of Ollie and Milo's chair as he glances around. "I bet you guys are dying to get out of here."

"You've no idea," Ares replies dryly.

That makes Scott chuckle. "You'd be surprised." He lifts a squat crystal glass up to his mouth and takes a sip. "Well, don't have too much fun guys." He gives me a wink, and a wide grin spreads across his lips as he turns to walk away.

Ollie leans over the table, his voice just above a whisper as he says, "Twenty minutes of playing nice, then I say we get the hell out of here, you game?" He sweeps his eyes past each of us.

"I'm in," I add, probably a little too quickly. None of the guys object though.

"All right, if we split up, we can hit more targets." Milo leans in over the table, our heads close together as we whisper conspiratorially.

"I see a few people we met out in Utah, Dante you come with me. We'll see if they have any info on the Whitmores."

"Mom made me promise I would dance with her at least once, so I'll go get that over with." Ollie rolls his eyes like it's such a hardship.

"That leaves you with Laura," Dante tells Milo.

Milo's vibrant blue eyes meet mine. "My parents are over there." He points to the bar near the door we entered through. "Shall we start there?"

I push nonexistent crumbs from my lap and nod my head jerkily. "Let's do this." The words are more for me than him. At least with only Milo by my side we won't attract as much attention as if we were our whole group.

Milo rounds the table and reaches for my hand. Grateful for the support I take his offered palm, lacing my fingers through his. With a gentle tug he pulls me to stand. I find my balance, making sure my back is straight. With one quick look over my shoulder I give Dante, Ollie, and Ares a little wave. My lower stomach hollows out, and for some reason a feeling of dread fills me as I walk away.

I blow out a long breath through my lips, hoping no one notices the way I'm clinging to Milo's hand and arm. I push the nervousness away, knowing it's only the amount of people and the fact that I feel like everyone is staring at me that's making me feel so edgy. Milo keeps his steps short, but his pace is fairly quick as we make our way across the room. He nods and says several hellos, but keeps us moving toward his parents.

"There they are," Linda announces like we'd be lost in the crowd for ages. Her smile and kind eyes go a little further to relax me. I've become familiar with their families, and I may not feel like one of them yet, but it's not for their lack of trying. "Did you enjoy dinner? I had the salmon, it was amazing." Her eyes get a little wider.

"It was all great," I answer quietly, focusing on her instead of the people around her, Matt, and Phil.

"I can't wait for dessert." She does a little shimmy, displaying how eager she is. I spend the next five minutes mostly listening to the others talk, no one is excluding me, I just don't feel like I have much to add to the conversation. I've only heard the last few minutes anyway, finding a bathroom has taken precedence over the conversation at this point.

I tug on Milo's sleeve and he immediately bends his head down so I can whisper in his ear. "I need to use the restroom." His head bobs up and he surveys the room. Spinning, he points to a sign near the door we entered through.

"Must be out there." He takes a step like he's going to lead me out.

"I'll be right back," I tell him before he can get too far.

Milo rolls his lips in, looks at me, then the door. "I got it Milo, I'm just going to run to the bathroom. I'll be right back." I give his hand a reassuring

squeeze before releasing him. The exit doors are only a few steps away. I walk hurriedly, feeling eyes on my back as I do.

The hall is quiet as soon as the doors fall closed. My shoulders slump as I slow my pace. I peer left, then right, before guessing which way to go. The knot in my stomach tightens as I journey down the hall, and I place my fist over the center of my belly. Maybe the food isn't sitting well.

As soon as I turn the corner, I see an alcove with a sign above it for the restrooms. Hurrying my pace again, I push through the door. I don't even bother looking around before I move through the first open stall door. I'm dancing by the time I gather the tulle from my dress to hold above my waist so I can pee.

Relieved, I exit the stall. There's a wide mirror above three sinks. I glance up and note my hair is still sprayed into submission, not daring to have moved. My eyes look a little larger with the dark mascara elongating my lashes. I run my finger under each eye after washing my hands to make sure I don't have any flecks on my cheeks. Turning so I can see over my shoulder, I get the first good glimpse of how much of my back is exposed. I groan, wishing I had asked if the hair girl to leave it all down. Falling back on my heels I shake my head, nothing I can do about it now. It will be hard enough to get this gunk out of my hair with a brush and a shampoo, trying to unravel it in the bathroom would probably leave me with a rat's nest on my head.

The door to the bathroom pushes open and I hurry to look away from the mirror. I lose the breath in my lungs. "Mom." The utter shock and surprise of seeing my mother standing in front of me has me frozen.

"Laura, baby, you have to run."

"Mom, where have you been, why did you leave?"

"We don't have time. You have to get away from here, away from them. He will hurt you." I can't believe after all this time she's standing here. Her skin has lost the sallow sheen, her cheeks are flushed, and there's a brightness in her eyes I don't ever remember seeing.

I take a step closer, her words finally registering as my body comes unglued. "Mom, no one is going to hurt me. The guys would never hurt me. I love them, and... I think they love me too." It feels so strange saying this to her, it feels like she's been gone years, not weeks. So much has happened.

She reaches for my hand, her grip punishing. "Laura, you don't understand. It's not them. It's him, it's Leon. He's here, he's coming for you."

I step back and pull my arm free from her grip. Immediately rubbing the soreness, she left behind. “He’s dead mom, he died years ago.” Bitterness fills my tone. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We do not have time for this, not now. You need to get out of here, run.”

I study her again. Her cloths are new, much nicer than anything she’s ever owned, and even her hair looks healthy. But the feverish look in her eyes isn’t new.

My heart falls, she is still living in the past. “Mom, I know about Leon, what he did.” I reach out for her arm, placing my hand over her shoulder. “Let me go get the others. Ares, he’s been researching Leon and his family. He can help us understand.”

She shrugs out from under my touch and grabs my shoulder. “Everything I’ve ever done was to keep you safe. I’m sorry I never told you. I never wanted this for you. I thought if I kept you away from all of it you would be safe.” A lump forms in my throat as I try to fight the pricking of tears behind my eyes.

“Mom, let me get the guys.” She’s shaking her head in denial before the words are out of my mouth.

“I can’t let him hurt you. Especially not now, he knows you are tied to all four of them.” Her face is pinched. “Please, just come with me. Once we get away, I’ll explain everything.”

I bite my lip. “What about my Infinity? I can’t leave them. I don’t want to leave them. Let me get Dante and the guys. We have a place and it’s safe. They’ll take care of us,” I plead, not sure if she even knows what is real, and what isn’t.

“Okay, okay. As long as we go right now,” she concedes. I take her hand in mine and pull the door open, still watching her over my shoulder.

She makes a strangled sound and jerks me back, placing herself in front of me. “No, no. I won’t let you hurt her.”

I look up and find an average-looking man blocking the exit door. His hair is a muddy brown, his eyes are more hazel than brown, and he’s rather tall. That uneasy feeling in my stomach grows. I reach for the back of my mom’s shirt and pull, wanting her far away from him as possible. Something about him is wrong, off. A chill shivers down my spine. People think Ares is dark, but this is true darkness, an oily evilness that seeps from his pores, threatening to tarnish everything it comes in contact with.

“Amanda.” His voice is soft, gentle even, which makes it even worse. Can everyone feel how tainted he is? “Introduce me to your daughter.” His head tilts and his eyes examine me, and I take a step back at the greed I see reflected in his gaze.

“I’m going to kill you,” my mother sneers.

Leon makes a sound that might be a laugh, but it’s a foreign sound, like he doesn’t even know how to laugh. “Come now darling, it’s not like you haven’t already tried.” All humor leaves his face. “Laura, either you leave with me now or I’ll strip your Infinity of their powers one by one when they come looking for you. Tick tock girl, I’m sure they’re already starting to get worried.”

Fear is my only emotion. I can’t let him hurt the others. Without any thought the lights dim, the shadows are reacting to my dread.

“A shadow walker,” Leon sighs like he found out the restaurant is serving his favorite meal. “Michael told me he saw you pulling shadows, but to see it for myself.” He looks at me again and that same greedy ownership is covering his features.

I release the shadows, realizing how important it is that he doesn’t find out how many abilities I have here. God knows how many people he could hurt. If I can get him away from here, maybe I could fry him. A sour taste fills my mouth at the thought, but I don’t care how bad I feel about it. If it will keep my guys safe, I’ll do whatever it takes.

“Let’s go,” I croak out the words.

A macabre smile lifts Leon’s lips. “Smart girl, you might be my child after all.”

My mother looks over her shoulder, and her eyes meet mine. There’s a promise there, one I don’t think she can keep, but a promise nonetheless.

“Come now ladies, I don’t enjoy being kept waiting.” His words are formal, but the threat of what might happen if we keep him waiting any longer is there.

I place one foot in front of the other, walking away from the ballroom, away from my Infinity, something I never thought I would do willingly. But I’ll do anything to keep them safe.

Thoughts of the guys, how worried they’re going to be and how angry Ares will get, fill my mind. Milo will blame himself for letting me go alone. Oh Milo, we never bonded. The strain of me being gone will be the worst for him. That gives me pause. Should I try to start a fire, or kill the power, but

what if my powers don't work on Leon? No one ever explained if they work on other Infinities. Should I scream?

I don't have an answer before Leon leads us to a back service door. We pass a few of the waitstaff, but no one even looks in our direction, they're all so busy with their own tasks.

I'm too afraid to let Leon know I have more than one ability right now. I might be able to shadow walk away from here, but that leaves my mom at his mercy. If nothing else I can shift, it's only a partial shift, but my claws alone will be enough to rip Leon to shreds. I walk past Leon as he holds the door open for us. I don't even look in his direction, I'm too afraid he'll see the intention in my eyes. There's a black town car waiting at the door, how long has he been planning this?

He thinks he's the one holding all the cards, but he's so fucking wrong. He will learn he should have let sleeping beasts lie.

CHAPTER 25

The sound of the door slamming behind me jolts me. Looking over my shoulder, I see a flat panel door with no handle, only a keyhole that could allow readmittance. “Hurry up, before someone notices you’re missing.” Leon crowds in close to my back and nudges my shoulder. I jerk away from him. Heat is already building under my skin as my body response to the threat of leaving my Infinity behind.

“Don’t touch me.” My voice is feral. I step closer to my mom, which brings me closer to the black town car parked a few feet away. Leon, not acknowledging me as a threat at all, steps past me and reaches for the rear passenger door handle.

Placing myself between him and my mom, I square my shoulders. I’m not getting in that car with him, neither of us are. It’s too risky. I have no idea how he stripped Wyatt of his powers, but there is no way I’m letting him get close enough to me to let that happen.

I let the heat I’m barely containing under my skin rise to the surface. I can feel the loose tendrils of my hair that have escaped my messy updo raise. The static electricity coursing through me is enough to make my bones ache.

Leon looks back and his brows furrow like he doesn’t understand why I’m not clambering to get into the door he just opened. Something he sees has him releasing the door and standing at full height, his head tilting to the side. “Well, well, what have we here?”

“Leave.” I nod my head at the car. Everything inside of me is praying that he’ll climb into the car and leave us alone. But I know it’s a wasted effort.

Movement catches my eye as Leon runs his fingers over his thumbs at his sides. My mother takes a step like she might try to get in front of me, but I lift

my arm to stop her. “You don’t want to do this,” I bluster, still hoping I can get him to leave without using my abilities on him.

“I really can’t think of anything I’d like more, actually.” His eyes go unfocused as he tilts his head again. He looks completely calm, but I’m reminded how deceiving appearances can be. Ares wears his refinement easily, but he doesn’t hide the danger that lurks underneath all his fancy cloths.

Leon looks the part in his navy blue suit and matching tie, but the crazy in his eyes can’t be missed. He looks almost desperate when he takes one step forward. In response I step back, forcing my mom to do the same. Leon’s lips tighten, and he looks over my shoulder at the door separating me from the ballroom full of people, namely four men who would probably do anything to protect me, just as I would them.

“Get in the car before I make you.” Some of his coolness slips away. I shake my head no. His desperation confirms I’m making the right choice by not following his orders. I’m starting to think that maybe he’s using the threat to the guys as his way of coercing me to go with him, but it isn’t going to work.

“We aren’t going anywhere with you.” While my fingers are still aching with the energy I associate with Ollie, I think about Dante. About the beast he calls out of me. My jaw aches, and I open my mouth to allow room for my teeth to elongate. I can’t manage the full shift like Dante, but I know that my nails are enough to rip through him if he tries to force me into the car.

“You’re just full of surprises,” Leon mutters in an awed whisper.

“Laura,” my mom warns, not sounding nearly as confident as I would hope. I know the guys have to be looking for me at this point, since I’ve been gone well over ten minutes. I need Leon to leave, or I need to make sure he’s not a threat if the guys find us out here.

“I’ll kill you before I get in that car. It would be a kindness considering what they will do to you if they find you.” I don’t need to elaborate on who *they* are. My Infinity is the only *they* I could be referring to.

A smirk tips up the corner of Leon’s thin lips. “Too bad your mother took you away from me. I would have liked to see what you could have become if she would have stayed.”

A little of the fear causing my hands to shake fades, making room for simmering anger to bubble up in its wake.

It’s his fault I lived my life on the run. His fault my mom is a shell of a

person. His fault I didn't know what, or who I was.

I take a step forward and darkness falls over my shoulders like a shadowy cloak. All three of my borrowed abilities are churning together. Shadows inch forward from my feet, closing the distance between Leon and me.

Leon's eyes jerk down as the inky tendrils curl their way toward him across the asphalt, seeking. He takes a step back, his eyes coming up to meet mine. "If you don't leave, I'll make you." I use the same threat he tried on me only moments ago. I don't hesitate this time, there's no room left for doubt. It's either him or us, and I'll be damned if it will be me and mine.

"Dammit," Leon curses, before taking one last step forward and sneering, "You'll regret not coming." Leon looks at the door behind me as it bursts open.

I turn to see Milo standing in the doorway, his wide shoulders filling the entrance and heaving with exertion. He reaches his hand out to me, but his eyes are focused on Leon as he flees. I hear a car door slamming followed by the squeal of tires, and when I look back it's to see the taillights of the black town car turning the corner and driving out of sight.

"Laura?" my mom's voice, again unsure, calls to me. I still have so much energy filling my veins that as I turn, my hair floats to follow me. She's staring at the open doorway, now blocked by Dante and Ares, while Ollie comes sliding up at the last second.

"That was Leon," I say needlessly. "And this is my mom."

Milo spares her a glance then rushes to my side. His wide palms land on my cheeks as he turns my face side to side as he inspects me. "Are you all right?" His hands run down my neck and over my arms, until they reach my sides.

"I'm fine Milo." I don't meet his eyes, or any of the guys'. I don't need to have Ares's ability to touch on emotions to know they are royally pissed. Milo continues his path all the way down to my ankles. "Really, I'm fine." I don't know what I was thinking following him out here. Fuck, I'm going to be in so much trouble.

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ABOUT ALBANY WALKER

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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