

*He's reckless and won't give
up on taking what he wants.*

Reckless

MICHELLE HORST

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Enjoy life - you only get one.

~ Sir Richard Branson.

Chapter 1

Mia

Grabbing my towel and water bottle, I walk towards the stairs. Although the music filling the air is beating with energy, it only leaves me feeling drained. It doesn't help that every other person here looks like they have enough energy to climb out Mt. Everest. I hate coming to the gym, but won't dare skip it. I've been working my butt off over the past few years to lose weight. It's taken a lot of hard work to lose forty pounds and with only ten pounds left to go, I'm too close to my target weight to jeopardize it now.

After our parents died I turned to food as a source of comfort. It's actually scary how I let it get out of control. During my senior year, I realized it was a problem I'd have to face. If it weren't for Logan I wouldn't even have had a date for prom.

I was head over heels in love with Logan back then. Hell, I even managed to lose a lot of weight my senior year in the hopes that he would see me as more than Rhett's chubby little sister. My hopes turned into dreams of a future with him when he taught me how to kiss. Yeah, I know he was doing me a favor but that didn't stop my love-sick mind from wishing he would return my feelings.

He was the one I spent nights dreaming about, and days drooling over. No one has ever made me feel as giddy, infatuated, and just down right ecstatic, whenever he gave me any attention.

The memory is a bittersweet one as I think back to the day he taught me how to kiss.

Feeling dejected I walk to my room. I hate being the odd one out. Nicole didn't stop gushing about her first kiss with Derek. Soon all the girls were comparing their kissing experiences and all I could do was hope no one would notice that I had nothing to say.

"Hey, did you have a bad day?"

My head snaps up at hearing Logan's question. My heart skips a beat like it always does whenever he's around.

"It's nothing. Did you all skip class again?" I ask, wondering why they're here so early on a Friday afternoon.

"No, it was canceled. There's a game tonight." Logan tilts his head and his eyes search my face. When he looks at me like that I can almost pretend he might see the real me. "Want to talk about it?"

I want to talk to him but not about what happened today, so instead of answering I just shrug. I walk into my room and drop my bag on the floor.

Logan comes in and I'm surprised when he sits down on my bed. Suddenly I'm nervous as hell and all I can do is stand like a pillar of salt while awkwardly wondering if he would think it's weird if I sit next to him.

"Talk to me, Mia. I might be able to help and worse case I can listen."

My thoughts go back to how stupid I felt while the girls were all laughing.

Secure in the knowledge that Logan has no idea how I feel about him, I look down at my feet and mumble, "I haven't kissed anyone yet and today all my friends were talking about their first kisses. It felt like ..." I let the words trail away, too embarrassed to continue.

"You felt like?" Logan stands up and walks to where I am. When I don't answer him, he gently places a finger under my chin and lifts my face so I have to look at him.

“It felt like ...” I swallow hard, feeling more sad than embarrassed that I’m having this conversation with Logan. “I’m fat and ugly. I know that’s why none of the guys will even look at me. Today it just felt like it was out there for everyone to see.”

Logan leans around me and he shuts the door. I glance at the closed door and then look back to him, a thankful smile on my face. I didn’t even think about the other guys being in the house. I don’t want them to hear about my day.

When Logan tucks some hair behind my ear my heart flutters. I have such a huge crush on him.

“You’re not fat and you sure as hell aren’t ugly, Mia.”

I try to keep the smile on my face and nod. Of course, he’ll say that. I’m Rhett’s baby sister.

“Don’t do that.” He brings both his hands to my neck and with his palms he nudges my jaw so I’ll look up again.

“It’s okay. It just sucks that I don’t know how to kiss. What if I meet a guy who wants to kiss me and I mess it up?”

“Is that what’s really bothering you?”

He’s so patient with me that it warms my heart.

“Yeah. I don’t want to look like an idiot.”

I can see he’s thinking hard about something, but I’m not complaining because his hands are still on my neck. I love it when he touches me. I resist the urge to close my eyes so I can just bask in the feel of his hands on me.

“Do you want to learn how to kiss?”

I think about his question, not sure what he’s actually asking me.

“It’s not like I can go for lessons somewhere,” I whisper.

“I can show you.”

For a second I can only stare at him. Did he just offer to teach me how to

kiss? I have to remind myself to breathe as excitement rushes through my body.

I nod and almost stutter, “Would you be okay with that?” I’m so thankful when the words come out sounding normal.

He drops his hands from my neck and smiles. It’s not his usual friendly smile. This time there’s a softness to it that actually makes me feel more nervous.

“Of course I’m okay with it.”

Duh ... I want to kick myself. Logan’s just offering to help because he’s friends with Rhett. It’s not like it means anything to him. It doesn’t stop me from feeling excited. Even if it means nothing to him, it will still be a dream come true for me.

When he takes a step closer to me and places a hand on the back of my neck, my mouth instantly goes bone dry. My whole body tenses as I wait for his next move.

“It’s normal to feel nervous when you’re about to kiss someone for the first time, but try to relax. If you worry too much about it you’ll end up missing out on the whole experience.”

I nod, unable to form any coherent words right now.

Tilting his head to the right, he leans closer until I can feel his breath on my lips. I stop breathing and stare at his mouth as if it holds the answer to all the mysteries of the universe.

My insides are quivering with nerves and I can feel my hands shaking. My heart is beating so loudly it’s all I can hear.

Slowly he closes the distance until his lips press softly against mine. Everything stops. The loud thumping in my ears, the quivering inside of me, and even the shaking of my hands. There’s only the perfect silence surrounding us as I feel the warmth of his lips on my own.

I jerk when I feel his tongue on my bottom lip. I didn't expect it and I flush bright red when he pulls away from me.

"I'm sorry," I blurt out, both embarrassed and sad that I ruined the moment.

Logan shakes his head as a sexy smile plays around his mouth.

"There's nothing to be sorry about," he says in a low tone that makes the quivering return with force. "This time open your mouth slightly and focus on what I do."

Again I can only nod, ecstatic that he's going to kiss me again.

This time he moves much quicker. He brushes his lips against mine as he takes a step that presses his body right up against me. It's a sensory overload as I try to take in what his body and mouth feel like all at once.

His tongue traces my bottom lip again and I almost don't remember to open my mouth. When my lips part he slips his tongue into my mouth and it makes tingles explode in my stomach. It's so overwhelming that I can't focus on anything.

He starts to caress my tongue with his own which makes my hands grab at his sides so I have something to hold onto or else I'll drop to the floor.

Softly, he bites my bottom lip and I take a shuddering breath in response to the incredible feelings engulfing every part of me.

He brings his other hand to my jaw and with his body he pushes me back until I'm up against the wall. This time when his tongue slips into my mouth, I'm not as overwhelmed and I try to mimic his movements.

Soon I'm so lost in kissing Logan that I forget it's not real. I move one hand up his body until I reach his neck, and I drink in the feel of his skin under my fingertips. This moment is everything ... it's heaven.

It's over too soon as he starts to pull away, pressing one last soft kiss to my tingling lips.

He pulls me into a tight hug and whispers, “You’re beautiful, Mia, and you’re going to make some lucky bastard very happy.”



Yeah, all those dreams turned to ashes when they all up and left for New York. If it weren’t for Josie, I don’t think I would’ve made it through that first year. We met at college and she quickly became my best friend. I swear there were days she kept me going when all I wanted to do was crawl into a deep, dark hole of self-pity.

That first year was unbearable. I had to deal with stuff I never thought would ever happen to me. Our parents might have died when I was young, but Rhett always made me feel safe.

I’ll even admit that it felt great that I was the one girl who was close to the Screw Crew. I had an idea why the guys gave themselves such a stupid name, or at least, I thought I knew why.

Once they left, I learned the true meaning of their name. It wasn’t just because of the stories I heard all over campus, but rather the fact that they screwed me, as well. Just like all the girls they used for a quick roll in the sack, I was discarded. It hurt like hell. I spent so many nights crying myself to sleep because of them, but no amount of tears eased the gutted feeling of rejection and sorrow.

Rhett and Logan were the only ones who kept contact with me during the first few months, but eventually Logan’s messages tapered out until they stopped. Rhett went from calling me every second day to maybe once every few weeks, until he stopped, as well. Thinking about it now, they both stopped around the same time.

I lost my phone and I refused to get a replacement phone on the contract they had set up for me before they left. The only thing I had to hold onto was

my pride. I was done being dependent on them. I got a cheap phone with a new number, determined to make it on my own.

I guess I wanted to stubbornly prove to myself that I would be okay without them.

Initially I blamed their lack of contact on the change of phone numbers. I kept hoping it was all to blame on some stupid misunderstanding. But I sent them quite a few messages from my new phone, explaining that I lost the old one but none of them bothered to reply. Every time I tried to phone Rhett, it said his number was no longer in use. When I tried to phone Logan and the other guys just to make sure Rhett was okay, I got the same thing. All their numbers were no longer in use. I didn't know what to make of it. Worried that something might have happened to them, I got on a flight to see for myself if everything was okay.

Josie kept telling me not to worry, that I shouldn't waste my time by going all the way to New York. I should've listened to her but once again I was stubborn. I needed to see them for myself, still hoping it was all some misunderstanding.

I spent the entire flight thinking how happy they would be to see me. I dreamt that we would laugh the silly misunderstanding away, and things would return to the way they were before the guys left North Carolina. I fantasized that Logan would take me in his arms, admitting how he'd always loved me. He'd say something sweet and loving, and sweep me from my feet with a passionate kiss.

I'll never forget the first time I walked into Indie Ink Publishers. I was so proud of the guys as I made my way up to the top floors, taking in everything they've achieved. My heart was beating crazily with excitement at seeing them all again.

Then I stepped out of the elevator. Carter and Logan were walking

towards me accompanied by an elderly man.

I smiled and took a step forward as the excitement in my chest reached new heights at finally seeing Logan again. Even though almost a year had passed since I'd seen him last, he still held the power to take my breath away. He had changed a lot during the past year. The boyish face I used to remember had filled out and become masculine. He had become a gorgeous man.

Practically falling in love with him all over again, I wondered if he would notice the weight I'd lost so far. Would he finally see me as a desirable woman?

All my hopeful thoughts and wild fantasies went up in a puff of smoke when he lifted his head and looked right at me.

Our eyes met - his devoid of any sign that he recognized me, and mine with the last spark of my dying hope.

It was only for a brief moment because Carter said something that made Logan look back down at the documents in his hand.

As they walked by me, I said hi but they didn't even bother greeting me back. I still remember the awful feeling that sunk into my bones as I watched them walk away from me. The fiery sting of rejection scorched my heart.

I forced myself to walk to the receptionist and asked to see Rhett. When I was told that he was out of the country on business, my heart just shriveled up and died. Realizing that my brother had gone overseas without even bothering to let me know, was a stab to my fragile heart.

I couldn't deal with the pain so I buried it deep. I told myself they were all just busy settling into their new lives, but as the holidays and birthdays slipped by, it became all too clear that I was nothing to them.

I didn't even finish my degree in interior decorating, dropping out of college at the end of my first year. Finishing the degree would've meant that

I'd have to use the money in the trust fund set up for all us after Mr. Hayes passed away, and I refused to do that.

Months would go by and I'd find myself harboring a sliver of hope again, nurturing the seed until the pain would be forgotten and it blossomed into the need to try and reconnect with them. I tried to see them two more times. The first time I was sent away, advised to make an appointment. They didn't see walk-in clients. Trying to explain that I was family was futile. The receptionist didn't even bother listening to me.

The last time I tried, I made an appointment. It was cancelled minutes before I would've boarded the plane. I didn't bother rescheduling. It was clear they were avoiding me and that I should get the hint.

I was done trying. It was time to accept that they didn't want me in their lives.



I'll make it on my own. Hell, I've been doing an okay job of taking care of myself back in North Carolina for the past three years, but since I moved to New York, things haven't been going all that great. The first week I got here I quickly realized there aren't many jobs available for someone like me.

I've managed to get a job as a receiver that pays hourly. The store only employs on a monthly basis and I think it's so they don't have to offer any benefits. It's also easier to let go of the slackers. Besides, it's not a place I see myself working at for long. It's just a stepping stone until I can find something better or figure out what I actually want to do with my life.

At least Josie is coming in two weeks. I miss her like crazy. She stayed behind to finish her degree, and now that she's graduated, she'll come to New York and we'll be able to find a place together. I can't wait for her to get here already. With her by my side things won't look as grim.

Josie wanted to go to LA but I was unwavering in my decision to move to New York. Actually, I encouraged her to move to LA. It's not like we'd stop being friends. At least, I hope us moving to different states wouldn't affect our friendship. In the end, Josie refused and said she'd join me in New York. I won't lie, it warmed my heart, knowing she cared enough about me to move out here.

The sad part is that I've been in New York four months already and none of the guys even know. It's been a year since I tried to see them. I only moved here because it's where Rhett is. My brother might not want me, but it's comforting knowing he's close.

Even if Rhett's not talking to me I still want to be close to him. I don't know what I did wrong that made the guys not want to keep contact with me, but it doesn't mean I've forgotten them. Sometimes the shock and sadness is overwhelming and I try to figure out what I could've possibly done wrong, or why it was so easy for them to forget about me after we were so close growing up. But most of the time, I'm okay with what happened. It is what it is and it sure doesn't help to cry about it.



A door to my left opens and I unconsciously glance inside the room. A woman twisting around a pole catches my eye and I slow my pace until I come to a full stop, staring at her as she masterfully curves around the pole. Her legs are toned and strong, keeping her fit body from plunging to the ground.

Damn, she makes it look so easy.

"There's a class starting in five minutes, if you want to stick around," a woman says from the open door.

My eyes dart to her and I smile nervously, letting out a self-conscious

chuckle. “Yeah, I think I’m going to give it a pass. I’m not exactly built for it.”

The woman pulls a face and waves my words away.

“That’s the whole point. It’s great exercise and fun.” She closes the distance between us and tilts her head. “Honey, we all start out looking like a bunch of wales trying to mate with a toothpick. Give me a few weeks and I’ll have you looking like that.” She points back to the beauty that’s now hanging upside down from the pole. I drink in the sight of her tight abs, knowing it will take more than a few weeks to get my flabby stomach looking like that. Hell, it will take a few miracles for me to look like that, never mind hanging from a pole while trying not to break my neck.

I can’t keep the cynical laugh from bubbling up my throat.

“I’ll make you a deal. Give me four weeks, but you need to come at least every second day. Follow all my instructions, and if by the end of four weeks you’re not happy with the results, I’ll refund your gym membership fee for two months.”

Hell, I could do with free membership. Things haven’t been going so great since I moved to New York. I’ve managed to find a cheap room in Washington Heights. It sucks that I have to share the apartment with two other people, a guy and a girl that seem to be around the same age as me. John keeps to himself, hardly ever leaving his room. I don’t know what he does in there all day long, and I really don’t care. I get a weird vibe from Ellen. She always smells like fish and hardly ever says a word. Just to be safe, I’ve added an extra lock to my bedroom door. It’s definitely not my dream home, but it is what it is. I’m just thankful it’s only temporary. As soon as Josie gets here I’ll be out of there.

“Okay,” I agree, figuring I’ll either get that hot body or free membership.

A smile splits over the woman’s face and she reaches a hand out to me.

“I’m Beth.”

I shake her hand, smiling back at her. “Mia.”

“Let’s get to class, Mia. It’s over here,” she says, pointing to the room behind me.

I follow her in and I’m relieved to see four other women already waiting. There’s a blonde that’s around the same size as me, and a red head that’s a bit bigger. It makes me feel comfortable knowing I’m not the only woman in here that’s not built like a super model.

I’ve been working hard to try and tone my body. Well, hard in my books is most probably a walk in the park for some of the women that are daily at this gym.

I’ve come far over the past four years, going from a size fourteen to a size ten. It’s been a lot of sweat and tears. The stubborn fat clung like shit to a wool blanket.

After Beth greets the class with a welcoming smile, she takes a deep breath.

“Breathe, ladies. It’s going to be fun. We believe in small, intimate classes. Usually we don’t have more than six students per class. This means that you will get loads of attention from me. Please feel free to ask me anything. We’re going to start with a short warm-up to get your neck, shoulders, arms and legs nice and loose. Then we’ll do a few fun spins and basic moves to get you used to the pole. The following is likely to happen: You will probably do a koala impression and hug the pole. This is normal so please don’t be embarrassed. Your hands will get sweaty and you’ll slip around a bit, and you’ll feel like you have no idea what the hell you’re doing. Again, this is normal. When our hour is up we’ll wrap up with a few minutes of stretching to cool down.”

I let out a breath and wipe my already sweaty hands on my towel.

“Place your towels and water to the side, giving yourself enough space to move,” Beth instructs and we all move at the same time.

An energetic beat starts up from the front of the class and Beth begins to walk on the spot.

“Just follow my lead. Let’s get those muscles loose, ladies.”

After the warm up Beth takes hold of the pole up on her little podium and swings around it. It only took a few seconds but she managed to make it look sexy.

I take hold of the pole as she says, “Just let your body flow around it. Don’t force the movement.”

I get up close and personal with my pole and try to swing around it. Try being the key word. I end up losing my balance and almost become one with the piece of steel before banging my breast bone against the pole, and end up going down like a sack of potatoes.

Quickly glancing around the studio, I make sure no one saw what an epic failure my first try was.

One of the girls falls down just like me, while another is doing a weird shuffle around the pole. The third girl actually manages to do a semi twirl around her pole. The last girl almost gets it done perfectly, but then she glances at us and loses her concentration.

I let out a heavy sigh as I pick myself off the floor. Why the hell did I let Beth talk me into joining this class? Oh yeah, cause I’m going to score two months free membership.

Beth patiently spends a few minutes with each of us, giving us advice on how to hold the pole and move our bodies. By the time the hour is up, I’ve actually managed to do a pretty decent twirl around the pole. I’m surprised by how quickly I caught on.

“There’s a store next to the health bar. You’ll find some pretty nice

outfits there which will be better suited for this class. The class is private so feel free to dress up. If you feel sexy it will go a long way to building your confidence while learning to pole dance.”

I pick up my towel and water bottle and as soon as Beth looks away, I make a run for the door not wanting to stick around just in case the women feel the need to get social after class.

I roll my eyes at myself. Making friends would be a good thing. I’ll try the class again tomorrow and then stay to meet the other women. Josie is in for one hell of a surprise. I’m going to try and convince her come to the classes with me so I don’t have to suffer alone.

I laugh just thinking how much fun we’re going to have once she’s here.

Glancing at my watch and seeing that it’s already past seven pm, I walk a little faster. I better hurry if I still want to shower and eat something before my shift starts. I hate working the night shift but beggars can’t be choosers.

Tomorrow I’m going to view two more apartments. I’ve saved enough for a deposit so when Josie gets here we can just move in.

It’s the start to a new life for me. I’m going to make the best of it and prove to myself that I can make it on my own.

Chapter 2

Logan

I frown as I look over the statements for the trust account. Something looks off and I just can't place it.

I've been working on this damn account for the past two days. I shouldn't have left it for so long but I've been swamped with work since I took over from George. Usually the accountants deal with all the accounts, but the trust account has nothing to do with Indie Ink Publishing, and seeing as I'm the attorney that set it all up, it falls on my shoulders.

I start to work through the statements from the past four years, individually totaling up our expenses. Carter has hardly put through any claims so I cancel his expenses out. Maybe that's why there's too much money in the account? It's just that I expected the balance to be a lot less.

I verify that Marcus, Rhett and Jaxson have indeed put through their regular expenses. Nothing is out of place. All of my expenses are in order as well.

What's wrong then? I can't put my finger on what's bothering me so I start to compare the expenses year to year. That's when I see the difference. During the first year of the trust account being set up there's almost eighty thousand dollars more in expenses than the second year.

I start to go through every transaction in the first year, comparing it to the

second year's transactions.

The frown on my face deepens when the first thing I notice is that there was nothing paid towards Mia's studies for the second year. When I check year three it's the same thing and that's when I get a horrible feeling in my gut. Checking the last year I see that all of Mia's expenses practically stopped at the end of the first year, all except the monthly debit for her phone.

"What the hell?" I grab my phone and quickly get Rhett on the line. "Do you have a minute? I need to show you something."

"Sure, I'll be up in ten."

I circle the last month Mia's expenses show and impatiently wait for Rhett. When he walks into my office, I push the sheet over to him.

"Did you know that Mia stopped claiming her expenses from the trust account? The only thing she claims for is her phone. Other than that there's nothing."

Rhett frowns and shakes his head, taking hold of the sheet, and quickly looks over the numbers.

"She's been claiming," he says more to himself than me. Then he looks up at me with confusion darkening his face. "Are you sure these are right? What about her rent, food, clothes? Fuck, what about her studies?"

"I've checked them, Rhett. She hasn't put through any claims. What has she been doing? When last did you talk to her?"

He takes his phone out and looks at it. "I spoke to her on Monday."

I get up from my chair wondering what the hell is going on.

"When you saw her the last time, did everything seem fine?"

Rhett gives me a look of warning. "I would know if something was wrong with my own sister, Logan."

I just stare at him waiting for him to answer my question. Although he's angry I can see him thinking about it.

He stares at his phone and I see the moment his confusion turns to worry.

“I would’ve met up with her while we were in Saluda. She was getting ready for graduation and I was just going to stop by before coming home. Then everything happened with Della and Danny. We’ve all been pretty much trying to find our feet after we found out Carter has a daughter. You know how it’s been.”

I sit down again as the feeling that something is very wrong creeps over me.

“I haven’t seen Mia in ... fuck, I think the last I saw of her was when we left to move here. When was the last time you actually saw her?”

Rhett sits down and I watch as panic flashes over his face. He brings the phone to his ear and I can hear the muted ringtone before it goes to voicemail.

Rhett shoves a hand through his hair and gets up again.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m catching the first available flight. I need to see Mia. I need to see with my own fucking eyes that she’s okay.”

Rhett doesn’t turn to leave but instead the color drains from his face, as he whispers. “I can’t remember when last I actually fucking saw or spoke to her in person. We’ve been chatting via texts. She’s been busy. I’ve been busy. Fuck.”

Rhett races out of my office and it’s only then I pick up my own phone. I scroll through the messages looking for signs that Mia was hiding something. I’ll be the first to admit we haven’t been talking a lot, but the few messages over the past three years made me think she was fine. I thought she was busy enjoying being a student.

She’s always been pretty level-headed. I can’t wrap my mind around any of it. I start to make excuses, telling myself that there’s something wrong

with the trust account. Maybe the bank has been debiting the wrong account with all of Mia's expenses. Yeah, I'm sure that's it.

I quickly log onto the bank and start to go through all the accounts I have access to.

I'm sure it's all just an error on the bank's side.

~

The second my phone rings I answer. I've been worried sick. I'm about to get on the first flight myself. I've been imagining all the horrible things that could've happened to Mia.

"Is she okay?" I ask Rhett. I need to hear the words that it's all just one big misunderstanding and that Mia is fine.

I can hear Rhett breathing before he clears his throat. "I can't find her, Logan. The house is empty. It's been fucking empty for months. The garden is overgrown. Everything is covered in dust inside the house. She's left most of her stuff, though. I don't fucking understand what's going on."

He lets out a harsh breath, and I can feel his worry seep right through the line.

"I checked with the college and she didn't graduate. She dropped out without letting me know. What the fuck is going on?"

"Contact her, Rhett. Phone her. Message her until she answers you. Ask her to meet face to face with you, or to come to New York."

"Don't you fucking think I've already tried that? She doesn't even answer my texts anymore. It shows that she reads every one of them, but she flat out ignores them."

I close my eyes as a fresh wave of panic hits. Why would Mia ignore us?

"Come home, Rhett. I'll make a plan. We'll hire someone to track her down. I'm sure she's fine and just rebelling. It's normal."

“It’s not fucking normal, Logan. Mia’s way of rebelling is by ordering four pizzas instead of one. Something is wrong. If anything happened to her I’ll ... fuck ... what the fuck did I do? I shouldn’t have left her here. I should’ve dragged her ass to New York.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Rhett. Mia is fine. We’ll find her.” I keep my eyes closed as I lie to him. Right now I need him to stay calm or I’m going to lose it as well.

“She’s my baby sister. I’m all she has and I’ve been too busy to make time for her. I’m the one person who should be rock solid in her life.”

I can hear that Rhett’s on the verge of crying and it makes me want to breakdown myself.

“Come home. We’ll find her,” I whisper, trying to convince myself that she’s okay.

I end the call and lean back in my chair, as I let the memories swamp me.

I remember how beautiful she looked the night I took her to prom. I got to hold her in my arms for hours as we danced. The way she smiled up at me, almost made me believe that she could love me one day.

I remember how nervous I was when I taught her how to kiss. I totally took advantage of her innocence that day, just grateful that I’d be the first to kiss her even if she didn’t feel the same way about me.

Damn, to this day it’s still the best kiss I’ve ever had. She tasted like a mixture of sweet innocence and hot fantasies.

I remember the attraction I felt towards her. She was only eighteen and I couldn’t do anything about my feelings for her. Rhett would’ve killed me. Besides, the feelings were just one sided. I couldn’t risk telling her and risk her being awkward around me.

I let her go, knowing she deserved more than her brother’s friend fantasizing over her from a distance. I was convinced I was doing the right

thing by not pursuing her.

Thinking about it now, maybe I should've told her how I felt about her. Shit, at least I'd be a part of her life. I'd know what she was doing and where she was.

I take a deep breath and shove the panic and worry down. None of that's going to help find her.

I start to search for PI's so we can go see one as soon as Rhett is back. Come hell or high water, I'm going to find my girl.

Chapter 3

Mia

“Josie!” I shriek as I run to her. I throw my arms around her and hug her tight. “I’ve missed you so much.”

Josie hugs me back, and for a moment we just stand in the middle of the airport holding each other. Damn, it’s good to see her again.

When I pull back, I say, “You have no idea how glad I am that you’re finally here.”

She grins happily at me and adjusts her bag over her shoulder.

I reach for the bag and slip it onto my right shoulder. The terminal is bustling with people so I wait until we’re outside, before I say, “I found a decent place for us to rent. We can only move in on Saturday though. We’ll have to share the bedroom I’m currently renting for the next two days. Will you be okay with that?”

“Of course,” she exclaims. “As long as we’re together.”

When we get back to the apartment, I fix us each a sandwich, which we eat in the bedroom.

“Have you heard from your brother?” she asks, after telling me about her graduation ceremony.

I swallow hard on the last bite, taking a sip of water to help wash it down.

“No.” Every time she asks if I’ve heard from any of them, I my heart shrink. I know she means well, but I wish she’d stop asking. Wanting to

change the subject, I ask, “When is your interview with Abstract Art & Design?”

“Thankfully, it’s in two weeks. I need a break after all the drama my parents gave me.”

My eye brows shoot skyward. It’s the first I’m hearing of this. “Are they upset that you moved to New York?”

She sighs heavily, and shoving her plate away, she falls back on the bed.

“You’d swear they don’t trust me. Hell, it’s not like I can’t look after myself, you know.” She rolls her eyes. “Daddy kept harping that it’s too far away from them. He wants me in LA.”

Suddenly, she darts back up, an angry look darkening her face. “He even threatened me! If I don’t find a job in the next two months he’ll cut my allowance in half. As if! I’ll fucking do what I want. Watch me. I fucking dare them to cut my allowance. I’ll make their lives a living hell.”

My eyes widen at her sudden burst of anger and venom towards her parents. I met her mom once, and she seemed sweet. I’m a little speechless. I’ve never seen Josie get upset. She’s always been the calm one.

I clear my throat, smiling a little weakly. “They your parents, Josie. They’re just worried. You’re their only child. I’m sure they mean well.”

She glares at me. “You’re supposed to be on my side.”

That’s my queue to leave. Josie must be tired from the flight. Hopefully after she’s had some sleep, she’ll be back to her old self.

I get up, grabbing my gym bag. I quickly stuff the boots I’ll be wearing at class tonight inside, then zip it closed. I’ve been doing much better with the pole dancing and even got myself an outfit for class. It’s nothing extravagant, just some boy shorts and a bikini top. Tonight we have to wear heels though, so that will be a first.

“I joined a pole dancing class. You want to come?” I offer, not wanting to

get on Josie's bad side. I almost hold my breath, hoping she'll say no.

Josie scrunches her nose and quickly shakes her head. "There's no way I'm pole dancing."

"I only have an hour between gym and work if you want to have dinner together?"

"Nah," she says as she lies down on the bed. "I'm just going to crash."

"Okay, I'll see you in the morning then." When I open the bedroom door, I glance back at her. Wanting to make her feel better before I leave, I say, "I'm glad you're here."

Her face seems to brighten a bit at my words, as I pull the door closed behind me.



I'm wearing my pole dancing outfit under my usual shorts and t-shirt.

When I walk into the class, I see Beth over on the podium, where she's fiddling with the music. She looks over her shoulder and smiles when she sees me.

"Hey, Mia. Did you remember to bring heels?" she asks as she steps off the podium.

I place my bag on the floor and open it. I take the boots out so I can show her. I hope she's okay with it. I don't have any heels. I also can't afford to splurge on a pair right now.

"I know you said heels, but I was thinking I'd be more comfortable in boots."

Say it's okay. Please, say it's okay.

A smile spreads over her face. "Those are perfect. So," she says, giving me an eager look. "It's been two weeks. We have two more to go, but I'd like to know how you feel about the class so far."

Relieved that she's happy with the boots, I answer her with a huge smile, "I really like it. It's a challenge, and although my weight hasn't dropped a lot, I can feel a huge difference in how my clothes sit on me. I have to admit, I'm enjoying it a lot."

"Muscle weighs more than fat, so don't worry about your weight. I'm glad you like it."

I love how down to earth Beth is. She doesn't make you feel uncomfortable in her class. She focuses on building her students' self-esteem."

"You're doing great and catching on faster than I thought you would. Do you like attending class with the other girls, or would you prefer one-on-one time?"

I frown, not sure what she's trying to say.

"I think you'll learn faster, if you're not distracted by people around you. I could show you the moves for today and you can have the room across from us to practice."

Wow, that sounds great. "Yeah, sure," I say quickly before she can change her mind.

"Great, grab your stuff so I can get you settled before the others get here."

I follow her to the other room and can't help but grin with excitement. Having my own space will make it so much easier to learn. I won't have to worry about what I look like or whether my fat's jiggling with every twirl.

~

I fall down on the couch next to Josie, and for a moment we just stare at our little place we've tried to decorate today. It's not much, but it's our space, and just the thought alone makes me tear up.

Josie's back to her normal self, which is a huge relief. She's been ignoring her parents' calls. I don't agree with her, but I keep my mouth shut. Proverbially speaking, I sure as hell don't want to rock the already unsteady boat. She doesn't realize how lucky she is. Man, what I would give to have my parents back. And Rhett. It's true what they say – you don't know what you have, until it's gone.

Suddenly, Josie jumps up and turns to me with a determined look on her face. "We should celebrate. Call in sick. I want to go out."

As much as I want to go out and just be a normal twenty-two-year-old, I need the money.

"It's just one night," Josie begs, holding up her pointer finger for emphasis.

Hesitating, I start to chew on the inside of my bottom lip. It's a nervous habit I can't shake.

She must see that I'm hesitating, because she takes my hand and pulls me up. "Come on, don't be such a drag." She pushes me towards my bedroom. "Make the call and get ready."

"I need the hours, Josie. Otherwise I won't have enough money for next week."

She shoves her fists in her sides, while rolling her eyes at me. "Fuck, if it's such an issue, I'll give you the money. We haven't spent any time together. You're either sleeping, pole dancing or at that stupid job. Don't you want to go out with me?"

I don't want her money. I wish she'd understand that I want to take care of myself. I don't think she'll ever understand how important that is to me.

"Please. We'll have so much fun." Her face softens a little as she pouts.

I suppose one night won't kill me. Besides, maybe having a fun night out will help get our friendship back to normal. I hate confrontation and just want

our easy going vibe back.

“Fine, but just tonight,” I give in.

She squeals, while pushing me all the way to my room. “Tonight’s gonna be awesome,” she sings, as she runs to her own room to get ready.

I take a shower, and quickly shave while leaving the conditioner in my hair for a few minutes. When I’ve dried myself, I take my time rubbing lotion all over my body. I don’t bother drying my hair, but instead scrunch it, giving it a wet and wild look.

I decide to wear my black skinny jeans and boots. I wear the boots every chance I get, needing to get used to them. The first night I had to practice pole dancing with them, I almost saw my ass without a mirror. It’s one thing wearing them every once in a while. But damn, it’s a whole different ball game climbing a pole out with them on.

When I pull my jeans on, a huge smile splits over my face. I don’t have to jump around to get the pants on. It slides easily up my legs and over my butt. I even have to grab a belt to help keep the jeans from sagging.

Feeling sexy because all my hard work is starting to pay off, I take a top from the back of the closet. The second I saw the top, I fell in love with it. I got it in a smaller size as motivation to lose weight.

I keep my back to the mirror as I pull it on. I smooth out a few wrinkles, then turn to face my reflection in the mirror. My eyes glide over my figure, and what I see makes my chin start to tremble with emotion. Pride fills my chest until it feels like I might burst. There are no rolls of fat in sight.

The top fits around my middle like a second skin. It has a scoop neck, which almost reaches my neck, before plunging down my back to kiss the top of my ass.

“Look at you,” I whisper in awe. “Months ago you wouldn’t have been caught dead in an outfit like this, but now you’re rocking it.”

I blow a kiss to my reflection, and with a huge grin, I quickly put on some mascara, blush and lipstick.

An hour later we're sitting in a bar. It's not my idea of fun, but Josie seems to be having a great time. I smile as she jumps up and down, along with a group of girls we met a few minutes ago. She's a total extrovert and makes new friends so fast it sometimes makes my head spin.

"Is there a cellphone in your pocket?" I hear a guy say behind me. I glance over my shoulder, which is my first mistake. The guy wags his eyebrows and says, "'Cause that ass is calling me."

My jaw drops when he makes a point of staring at my butt and biting his bottom lip.

"No," I say as I struggle not to pull a disgusted face. "Just no. That's the worst pick up line ever."

The creep actually has a set of balls on him, because he leans closer to me, then trails his middle finger down my back. He even groans, which makes me want to gag.

"I'm like a firefighter, I find them hot and leave them wet."

This time I can't keep from pulling a disgusted face, as I say, "Give up already. You're only making an idiot of yourself."

His smile is quickly replaced with a sneer. "I hope you have a vibrator at home, because you can go fuck yourself, bitch."

Ugh, some people are just born natural assholes. I turn my back to him, hoping he'll leave me alone.

I down half my drink, pretending to be very interested in what's happening on the dance floor. Someone bumps into me from behind, spilling something cold over my hair and down my back.

I dart up, ready to slap the bastard. I hear a muffled 'sorry' as I swing around. My eyes meet a wall of muscle that's covered with a blue t-shirt.

When it's clear that it's not the same creep from before, I quickly swallow the insults back down.

I glance up and it feels as if someone just punched me right in the gut.

Rhett places his drink back on the bar and smiles as he says, "Sorry, babe. Didn't mean to spill my drink all over you."

I can only stare at my brother, while feeling totally overwhelmed. He's changed so much. His face is harder, and it's missing the playful look he always had. I don't recognize the smile on his face. It's too stiff for Rhett. His smiles used to be able to light up a room.

"Damn, bro. We've just walked in, and you already got yourself a hot piece of ass," Marcus says, the moment Rhett looks at me.

I see the moment he recognizes me. It plays over his face in waves of relief, shock, and then anger. His eyes drop to my boots, before they make their way back up to my face. He clenches his teeth and growls, "What the fuck, Mia?"

For a stunned moment, I can only look at my brother, hurt that those are his first words to me in three and a half years.

We used to be so close. After our parents died, Rhett became my world. He stepped right in and became my protector and safe haven. I idolized him. He was the one person who got me.

It feels as if I'm caught in a daze, as I turn around and walk away. My body is moving on its own, as I push my way through all the people standing around.

I can't believe how upset he is. What happened to us? What did I do that was so bad?

Once I'm out the door, I dig in my bag for tissues. I find a few crumbled ones, and struggle to dry my back and hair. Ugh, it's a lost cause. I just want to crawl into my bed and cry until I'm numb.

“Mia!”

Hearing Rhett behind me makes me feel torn in two. Part of me wants to run away from the pain, while the other half wants to turn around and bury myself in his arms.

I want to scream at him for just forgetting about me. I want to beg him to forgive me for whatever I did. The emotions are dizzying and suffocating.

He moves in front of me, blocking my way before I can decide whether I want to run or stay. Stubbornly, I look at the ground, refusing to show him how much he’s hurt me.

He takes hold of my shoulders and the touch shatters the walls I’ve worked so hard to build up. I throw myself at Rhett, wrapping my arms as tight as I can around his neck.

“Let me just hold you,” I whisper through the tears. “Just give me this moment.”

His arms move around me, and I feel him shudder as he holds me close. He smells so familiar ... like home, and it tears at my insides.

“Mia,” I hear Josie call.

I don’t want to, but I force myself to pull away from Rhett.

His hands go to my cheeks, and he wipes the tears away with his thumbs, while forcing me to look up at him. When I see the tears on his face, I have to fight with all my strength to not break down again.

“Why?” I ask, hoping he’ll at least give me an answer. “Why did you just forget about me? What did I do wrong?”

A dark frown quickly replaces the emotional look on Rhett’s face, and right now he looks so much like Dad used to, right before we got a spanking.

He starts to shake his head slowly. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

I take two steps back, so he has to drop his hands.

I feel a hand on my shoulder, and when I glance to my left, I see that it's Jaxson. I shrug his hand away and take another step back. When Carter and Marcus join us, my heart feels like it's being crushed to powder. That means Logan is here too. I don't think my heart's going to survive tonight.

Josie takes hold of my hand and takes one look at my face, then says, "We need to go."

I nod, and I let her pull me away, because right now, I can't think clearly through the heartache. I never thought it would hurt so much, seeing Rhett again.

"You're not going anywhere," Rhett says, as he takes a hold of my arm, stopping Josie from pulling me down the sidewalk.

"Let go of her," Josie hisses, which makes my eyes widen.

"Who the fuck are you?" Rhett growls at her, pulling me further away from Josie.

"I'm her best friend," Josie growls right back, not showing an ounce of fear.

This is going to end badly if I don't stop them.

"It's okay, Josie. This is Rhett ... my brother," I quickly explain, hoping it will be enough to defuse the tension.

"I know who he is," she snaps angrily. "I know who they all are," she starts to rant. "The screw crew who practically fucked their way from North Carolina to New York, and -"

"Damn, woman," Marcus interrupts her. "You need to chill. This is between Rhett and Mia."

Josie sucks in a deep breath, getting ready to give Marcus a piece of her mind. I don't have enough strength to deal with Josie, as well

"Just give me a few minutes. Go back inside. I'll come get you when I'm ready to go."

She shakes her head, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’m not leaving you.”

I close my eyes for a second as I try to regain control of my rampant emotions.

“It’s not up to you, Josie. I need this. Go have a drink and dance some more,” I say, putting my foot down. With everyone being upset, Josie is just making the whole situation more volatile.

“Fine, talk to him,” she grinds out. “I’m waiting right here.”

I give her a pleading look to calm down, and turn back to Rhett. Once I’m facing him again, I have no idea what to say. I’ve never felt uncomfortable around him before, and it sucks that our easy-going bond is gone.

Rhett scowls at Josie, one last time, before he pulls me to the side. I glance at the other guys, and they all have the same look of surprise on their faces, as they stare at me. When my eyes meet Logan’s, I almost groan as a fresh wave of pain hits.

He looks heartbreakingly handsome, even more than I remember from the last time I saw him. His hair is a little darker, almost brown. It must be because he doesn’t get out in the sun much since he started working. His brown eyes are filled with questions and something that looks dangerously like disappointment. There’s no sign of the mischievous look they always had. Not even a glimmer.

Actually, screw him. Where does he get off looking disappointed?

“What the hell happened, Mia? Why did you drop out of college? Where have you been staying? You’ve lost so much weight, I almost didn’t recognize you. How the fuck have you been surviving? Why haven’t you returned my messages?” Rhett throws one question after the other at me, drawing my attention away from Logan. Rhett’s face is tight with rage, and it only makes my own anger surface.

I yank free from his grip and wrap my arms around my waist.

I can't bring myself to look at him, as I answer, "You didn't return any of my messages. None of you did. For months I tried to call, but it said your numbers were no longer in use."

A confused look washes over Rhett's face, and he takes a step closer to me. "Are you doing drugs?"

WTF? In shock, my eyes snap up to his. "No! Of course not. Why would you even think that?"

"You've lost a shit load of weight and you're not making any fucking sense. Up until two weeks ago, we were still messaging each other," he says, anger dripping from every word.

With my own anger momentarily forgotten, my mouth drops open, but I can't form any words. I shake my head, wondering what the hell he's talking about.

"Mia," Logan talks for the first time. I have to close my eyes, as the emotions from just hearing him say my name, wash over me. His voice still has the power to create havoc with my heart.

When I open my eyes, I watch as Logan comes to stand next to Rhett. Immediately, I notice how much they've grown. Rhett is still the tallest in the group. I used to reach his shoulder, but now the top of my head barely makes it to his shoulder, and that's with the extra height I have from wearing the boots.

"I haven't heard from you in over three years, Rhett. Three years and four months to be exact. Even before I lost my phone, you weren't talking to me that much anymore. Hell, I was so worried I came to New York, just to make sure you were all okay."

I suck in a deep breath and looking away at the buildings across the street, I whisper, "The first time I came to see you, you were overseas. You left the

country, and you didn't even bother telling me. I got the message loud and clear that day, but like an idiot, I had to try again. The second time I tried to see you, I was told to make an appointment. I made an appointment, which you cancelled. Like I said, I got the message loud and clear. I just wish I knew what I did wrong to make you all break contact with me."

"Why didn't you talk to any of us when you came to New York the first time?" Carter asks.

Anger starts to simmer in my chest, as I glance at Carter.

"I tried. I said hi, and you both ignored me." I glare at Logan, and even I can hear how bitter my words are. "Logan saw me. He looked right at me and just walked by."

Rhett turns his back on me and grabs fistfuls of his hair, as he lets out a roar of anger. He pivots around and only stops when he's right in front of me. I've never seen him so angry before, and it makes me instinctively cringe away from him. He yanks his phone out of his pocket and opens a chat before holding his phone right to my face.

"We fucking messaged every day!"

The screen is a blur and I have to move back, so I can focus on the words. I start to shake, as I reach for his phone. At first, there are only panicked messages from Rhett and I can see that they've been read. As I scroll up, it feels as if the ground is opening up beneath my feet.

Mia: I'm not moving to NY! I'm staying here. We can make some time over the holidays to get together.

Rhett: FFS! I want you near me. It feels like every time we make plans to get together, something fucks it up. I don't like you being that far away from me.

I keep reading, not understanding anything anymore. There are dozens of messages. Rhett thought he was talking to me? More important, who the hell

pretended to me?

“I didn’t send any of these,” I whisper, feeling an icy chill ripple up my spine. Something is very wrong.

Rhett grabs the phone from my hands and goes to his contact list. He brings up my name and shows me the number. It feels unreal, as I stare at my old number.

“I thought I lost my phone. Someone must’ve taken it. Why would they do that?” I’m not asking anyone in particular. I just can’t wrap my head around it all.

“You said you got a new phone,” Rhett says in a much calmer tone than before. “Let me see it.”

I pull it out of my back pocket and hand it to him, not seeing how it’s going to solve any of this.

Rhett’s fingers fly over the screen, before he frowns again. “Mia, you have the wrong number for me.”

“What?” I grab the phone back and look at the number. A shuddering breath works its way through my body, as I go to Logan’s name, and what I see freaks me out completely.

“I put in the right numbers. I know I did. I triple checked each number before I saved it.” I hold the phone out to Rhett so he can see. “The same weird number is under Logan’s name. I never thought to check the numbers, because I made sure I typed them in right the first time.”

“I have your old number as well,” Logan says, as he takes his phone out and dials my old number. He puts it on speaker phone, so we can all hear. It rings for a while, before my voice sounds up, “You’ve reached Mia. Please leave a message.”

I don’t know what this means. My eyes dart over them all, but it’s Jaxson who places his hand on my shoulder. “You thought we just left you?”

I nod as a fresh wave of tears threatens to wash me right off my feet.

“Sweetheart,” he whispers, as he pulls me into a hug, “I’m sorry. We should’ve tried harder to see you. I thought you were busy with your studies.”

I keep nodding against his chest, knowing I won’t be able to say anything.

When he pulls back, there’s a look of intense pain on Rhett’s face. His eyes are shining with tears, and his voice sounds rough when he says, “You thought I just left you? All this time you thought that?”

The look on his face reminds me of the day we were told Dad and Mom died in a car accident. My heart squeezes painfully, just like it did then. I’ve tried to be strong the past few years, but hearing that they didn’t just leave me, didn’t forget me ... fills me with incredible relief and joy.

I dart forward and throw my arms around Rhett’s waist. I bury my face in his chest and ugly cry from the relief I feel.

“I missed you.” It’s all I can say over and over.

Chapter 4

Logan

When we're all back at Rhett's place, I try to calm myself down. I want to hold her so badly it's making me feel restless - as if I've had too many energy drinks. Rhett's not letting go of Mia, so I'll just have to be patient.

Marcus pours us all drinks, and I thankfully take one, needing to get the edge off.

"Tell me everything," Mia says, her voice now filled with excitement. "How have you all been?"

It's hard to tear my eyes away from her. She's fucking beautiful. My memory seriously didn't do her justice. Hell, she's lost so much weight, I almost didn't recognize her. Her hair's longer, too. She used to be tanned, being out in the sun a lot, but now she looks pale. The top she's wearing shows every perfect curve of her breasts, which makes my cock stir to live. My eyes burn a hot path over her body, all the way to the sexy boots she's wearing.

When I bring my eyes back up to her face, she glances at me, but quickly looks away again.

Still the same green eyes I fell in love with.

Still the same smile I would do anything to see every day.

"Not much has changed," Rhett answers her, yanking me out of my thoughts. "We've mostly been working our asses off. The only huge change

is Carter recently found out he has a daughter.”

“Seriously?” Mia exclaims. “That must have been a shock.”

“That’s an understatement,” Carter says, but then he smiles.

We all fell in love with Danny the second we met her. She’s clever, beautiful and just the sweetest little girl. I’m happy that Carter and Della are working through their problems.

“She’s perfect,” Carter whispers, his voice filled with awe. “Her name is Danny and she’s three, well almost four.” His smile widens until all you can see is the love he has for his little girl. “She’s amazing, Mia.”

“I hope I’ll get to meet her.”

“You will. We’re just settling in. Her birthday is coming up, and I want to give her a huge party.”

I notice that Mia won’t look at me and it frustrates the hell out of me. Instead, she looks at Jaxson and Marcus. “What about the two of you?”

Marcus swallows the sip he’s just taken and places the glass on the table. “Nothing new on my side. Just working my ass off.” He walks over to where Mia is and presses a kiss to her forehead. “I have a meeting in LA tomorrow and have to catch an early flight. We’ll catch up soon.”

Carter also gets up and hugs Mia. “Yeah, I need to get home.”

While they leave, I glance at Josie. She’s been surprisingly quiet. I frown when I notice how she’s glaring at Rhett. You’d think she’d be happy for Mia.

I walk over to her and smile when she looks at me. She’s Mia’s friend, so I try to be friendly. “How long have you known Mia?”

“We met the first week of college.”

She doesn’t say anything else, and I have to admit, something about her makes me feel uncomfortable. I tell myself she’s just being defensive because she doesn’t know any of us.

“We need to get going, Mia,” Josie says, standing up.

I’m just about to protest when Rhett says, “Mia’s staying here tonight.”

“I can take you home,” Jaxson quickly offers. He hugs Mia goodbye, then looks to Josie.

“I’ll get a cab,” she refuses his offer, then looks at Mia again. “Are you coming or staying?”

“I’m going to stay,” Mia answers. She walks Josie to the door. “I want to catch up with Rhett. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Whatever,” Josie bites out, and without another word, she storms out of the apartment. Damn, she’s cold.

Mia frowns at Josie’s retreating back before she steps aside so Jaxson can leave. I follow Mia back to the couch. She sits down next to Rhett again, and I take the seat across from her.

Now that it’s just the three of us it’s pretty clear that she’s doing her best to avoid looking at me.

“I’m sorry about what happened when you came to New York,” I apologize, hoping it will help smooth things out between us. “You look good, Mia. I wouldn’t have recognized you if you walked by me in the street.” What I really want to say is she looks breathtakingly beautiful, but that would be pushing it with Rhett sitting right next to her.

“It’s okay,” she whispers, and finally she looks at me. I can see that she’s forcing her smile because it doesn’t reach her green eyes.

“Why did you drop out of college?” Rhett asks.

I lean a little forward, placing my elbows on my knees. We need to have this conversation with her.

She tucks some hair behind her ear and carefully looks at Rhett. I hate seeing this side of her, that she feels the need to be cautious around us.

I’m going to find out who has her phone and I’m going to beat the living

shit out of that person.

“After the first trip to New York, I was angry and hurt. I thought you’d all cut me off and I didn’t want to use any of the money. I wanted to prove to myself that I could make it on my own so I dropped out and started working.”

“Fuck, Mia,” Rhett growls. He hugs her as if he’s scared she’ll disappear again. “Where do you work? You need to start using the trust fund again. Shit, you’ve lost so much weight. Mom and Dad would kill me if they were around to see this.”

“It’s not your fault,” Mia says.

When she sits back she smiles proudly. She has a new found self-confidence that shines from her whole body, and it only makes her that much more desirable.

“I’m not starving, Rhett. I’ve been eating healthier and doing exercises. I work at a store close to where I live.” For a split second a self-conscious look flashes over her face. I would’ve missed it if I weren’t staring at her. “It isn’t great, but I manage.”

“I’m glad you’re looking after yourself,” Rhett says. “Which store? What do you do there? Where do you live?”

He’s asking her all the questions I would’ve so I’m okay with just listening ... for now. But damn, the need to hold her keeps growing, and I seriously hope I get a moment alone with her.

“We’re renting a place in Washington Heights. I got a job as a receiver at Target. I know you won’t approve, but it’s only temporary until I can find something else.” She scrunches her nose and looks cautiously at Rhett, waiting for his reaction.

With a sigh, he wipes a hand over his face.

“I can’t believe this,” he whispers. He looks at me as if I have all the answers for this fuck-up. “We need to find out who has her phone. Who the

fuck have we been messaging?”

“We’ll find out. I’ll get on it first thing tomorrow.” I don’t add that I’ll do everything in my power to make that person suffer the way Mia has.

“I can’t believe I let this happen,” Rhett says, clearly taking all the blame.

“We let it happen,” I say, wanting to lessen his guilt, but not backing down from taking responsibility for my own lack of action.

“Guys,” Mia says, “neither of you let anything happen.”

Rhett shakes his head. “You’re my responsibility, Mia. I’m a fucking poor excuse for a brother.”

Her chin starts to tremble, and she takes hold of his hand. “Don’t say that,” she whispers. “You thought you were talking to me. I’m the one who just gave up.”

“Hold on,” I say as I think of something else. “Didn’t you get our emails either?”

“Emails?” she asks, shaking her head.

Tension coils in the back of my neck. This is bad.

“I set up a will for all of us, including one for you, Mia. I emailed yours to you so you could sign it, which you did, or at least I thought you did. I also set up a retirement annuity and life insurance. Did you get those emails?”

She shakes her head, and I can see she doesn’t understand the severity of it all.

“If you didn’t sign them, then who did?” I ask the question so she’ll understand what I’m getting at. “We need to go to the police.”

“What does it mean?” she asks, her eyes huge with worry.

“It could mean a number of things. Hell, anything from fraud to identity theft. None of it is good.”

~

While Mia was showering, I quickly talked things over with Rhett. We agreed that Rhett would take Mia to the police station so we can get it all on record, while I talk to the PI we hired. He was making way on finding Mia. We were just lucky enough to run into her tonight. Now he'll have to help us track down whoever's doing this to Mia.

I wait for Mia to come out of the guest room, hoping I'll get a few minutes alone with her.

I pick up all the glasses and take them to the kitchen. When I walk back into the living room, the door to the guest room opens.

When she comes out and notices that it's just the two of us, she freezes. Damn, that stings. Mia always looked happy to see me. Hell, sometimes it felt like I was closer to her, than I was with Rhett. Now she's withdrawn.

I'll just have to win her trust again. I did it once, I can do it again.

"Rhett's showering," I say, then point to the couch. "Can we talk?"

"Yeah. Sure." She bites her bottom lip nervously. I can't stop myself from smiling. Seeing her nibble on her lip, always made me want to kiss her, just so I could soothe that same lip with my tongue. The urge is much stronger than I remember, as my eyes zero in on her mouth.

She doesn't sit down, but instead, stands in the open space between the couch and the window.

I used to be the one who was always nervous around her, but not anymore. Wanting to hold her more than anything, I just go for it. I step into her space and wrap my arms around her. At first, she stiffens, but when I don't let go, she brings her arms slowly up and wraps them around me. When she presses her cheek to my chest, I close my eyes at the intense feelings flooding me. She's shorter than I remember. She used to be able to rest her chin on my shoulder, but now she fits perfectly under my chin.

She still smells the same, something flowery mixed with a hint of her. I

take a deep breath, filling my lungs with her unique scent.

When it feels like she's going to pull back, I tighten my hold on her. I'm not ready to let go of her yet.

"I'm sorry for what happened when you came to New York. If I had known you were coming things would've turned out differently."

I press a kiss on the top of her head just as Rhett opens the door to his room. His eyes meet mine for a second before I let go of Mia.

Years ago, he sat us all down and told us Mia was off limits. I need to talk to him about it though. We're not in school anymore, and he should know by now I'd never do anything to hurt her. I want to date her. I want to find out if she still likes the same things. But until I've got his blessing I can't act on my feelings.

"I'm going to head home. I'll see you at the office," I say to Rhett.

"Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow," Rhett says as he walks to the kitchen.

I turn my back to Rhett and let my arm slip around Mia's waist. I pull her closer, and placing a finger under her chin, I nudge her face up. When our eyes meet, a blush creeps over her cheeks. That's new. I take it as a good sign, and leaning down, I press a kiss to her forehead. I keep my lips to her skin, as I hug her to me again. Damn, I missed her.

She stands on her toes so she can bury her face in the crook of my neck. Her arms wrap tightly around me as I hear her take a deep breath.

"I missed you," she whispers.

That's all it takes. Three words to break down the barrier of the last three years.

I pull back, letting my eyes feast on her gorgeous face, one last time.

"Smile for me," I whisper so Rhett won't hear.

Her lips curve, lighting her face like a million stars.

"Still the most beautiful smile in the world." The blush on her cheeks

deepens at my words. I love knowing that I have an effect on her.

“I’ll be in touch.” I press one last kiss to her forehead, and walk to the front door before I lose all control and kiss her the way I really want to.



It’s been four days since we found Mia. Between all the new business ideas Carter has in play, and setting up a new will for him that now includes Danny, Della, and Jamie, I’ve only gotten the new forms for Mia to sign in order today.

I was surprised when I saw that Rhett is still the beneficiary should something happen to Mia. Part of me was hoping that whoever’s been fucking with her had changed the beneficiary to themselves, but I suppose it would make things too easy.

I dial Mia’s number, excited that I have an excuse to see her.

“Hello?”

“You haven’t changed our numbers yet, have you?” I say. “It’s Logan.”

“Uhm ... I forgot to get them from Rhett, and he’s been busy, so I didn’t want to bother him. I would’ve gotten them whenever I met up with you guys again.”

I can hear as she walks into a building, the music coming clearly over the line.

“Where are you?” I ask, more out of curiosity than anything else.

“At my gym. I take ... uhm ... zumba and yoga classes. Hold on for me quickly.” I listen to her greet someone in the background. “Hey, Beth. Which room can I use?”

“Grab number four. The others are already occupied. Oh, work on your posture tonight. I’m starting the next level with you tomorrow.”

“Thank you.” I hear a door close. “Logan?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“Sorry about that. Did you need something?”

Oh yes, the reason for my call.

“I’ve got new documents for you to sign. When can we meet?”

“How about after gym? I have an hour before I have to be at work.”

“Which gym? I’ll meet you there.”

“Sultry Dance Studio,” she rattles off. I have to admit it doesn’t sound like any gym I’ve ever been to.

“Great, I’ll meet you there.”

When we end the call, I grin excitedly. Grabbing the folder with Mia’s documents in, I leave the office and drive over to where the studio is.

I have to drive a block over before I find an open spot. I leave the folder in the car and walk the short distance.

When I go inside, I rethink my idea of coming. It’s clearly not the average gym.

“Can I help you?” A petite blonde smiles at me from reception.

“No, I’m just here to pick up a friend. Where would I find the rooms?” I sound like a complete idiot, but luckily she takes pity on me.

“You might want to check upstairs, that’s where the classes are.”

“Thanks.”

When I get upstairs, I’m a bit confused until I see that the doors are numbered. I walk to number four and softly open it, just in case it’s the wrong room. The last thing I want is to face an entire room full of pissed off females because I walked in on something no man wants to see.

I’m relieved to find the room empty, well mostly. There are poles throughout the room, and a familiar song is playing. I see Mia in the corner right by the mirrors which span over most of the wall.

She’s sitting on the floor with her knees pulled up and as the song counts

off one-two-three, her body pulses with the beat.

Instantly, I'm hypnotized by Mia. I close the door and lean against it, hoping she doesn't notice me standing here like a creep.

When the chorus starts to *Chandelier* she pulls herself up on the pole, and it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Her hair is wild around her while she has one leg wrapped around the pole, and the other is stretched out. The rest of her is curled in towards the leg that's wrapped around the pole. The move looks intense, as if it's loaded with every emotion the song wants you to feel.

Her movements are so graceful that I don't actually take in that Mia is pole dancing. I've been in a strip club before and what I saw there is nothing like this.

When the time comes for the chorus again, I feel a sweet aching in my chest, knowing what's coming. She pulls herself up against the pole and I lose my breath.

I loved Mia Daniels when she was eighteen. Watching the woman in front of me it's very clear that my feelings haven't gone away over the years, but have only grown into a raging fire. I've tried to date other women but none of them ever held up next to Mia.

I have to talk to Rhett, and I can only hope he'll understand and give his blessing, because I've never wanted anything the way I want Mia.

It has nothing to do with the weight she's lost. I love everything about her, but it's her smile and eyes that made me fall for her. I'll admit she looks fucking hot in those boots and sexy as hell outfit.

As my eyes follow her, I wish I could go back in time so I could tell her I loved her the first and only time I kissed her.

Chapter 5

Mia

I pause the music and drink some water before I check the time. I still have fifteen minutes, so there's time to do the routine again. Grabbing my towel, I dry my hands and pat over my face.

I play the music and take a deep breath as I walk back to the pole. Movement catches my eye, and I glance at the door thinking it's someone who might want to use the class next.

I stop when I see Logan, my eyes growing huge with embarrassment.

Shit! How long has he been standing there?

Ugh ... now would be a good time for the ground to open beneath my feet, and swallow me whole.

Then I remember that I'm practically dressed in underwear, and my embarrassment quickly morphs to mortification.

This is not how I imagined our meeting. Since he called, I've been dreaming up every possible romantic scenario under the sun. Hell, he's always had the leading role in my fantasies.

Yeah, right. Like any of them will ever happen.

He smiles, which doesn't make me feel any better. I turn back around and walk to where my bag is. I'm practically dying that he's seeing me dressed in such a slutty outfit. I grab my shirt and yank it over my head then sit down so I can wrestle the boots off. It's a pain getting them on and off but they are

more comfortable than a pair of heels.

He crouches in front of me and I almost knock him out with my boot as it comes off. I shove the boots in the bag and reach for my shorts.

“It’s just something I do for myself,” I start to ramble. Jeez, he must think I’m a slut now. What if he thinks I’m stripping for money and lied about the job at the store? “I only started pole dancing because Beth talked me into it.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. It was amazing to watch.”

I stand and pull my shorts up my legs. My eyes start at his feet and work their way up his body. When our eyes meet, I’m surprised to see heat in them. It’s the same look he gave me when he taught me how to kiss. My heart starts to beat faster and for the millionth time, I wonder if he might feel something more than friendship for me.

I tie my hair back in a ponytail and chew on the inside of my bottom lip.

“Please don’t tell Rhett, or any of the other guys. I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Your secret’s safe with me.”

“Did you bring the documents?” I ask to steer the conversation away from pole dancing.

“Yeah, they’re in the car.”

I make sure I have everything and quickly switch off the sound system. When I open the door, the classes around us start to leave. I quickly close the door again, not sure how all the women will react to seeing a man up here. The only men I’ve seen up here are usually gay and basically one of the girls.

I turn back to Logan, and I have to admit there’s nothing about him that’s even remotely gay.

“The classes are busy leaving. Do you mind waiting ten minutes?”

He smiles at me, and it makes all those familiar tingles come back with a heady rush.

“I don’t mind.” He comes to stand next to me and leans back against the wall. He places the bag on the floor and crosses his arms over his chest. I almost groan as the pose makes him look way too sexy for my poor heart to handle.

“Did Rhett speak to you about moving closer to us?”

I turn to my side and also lean against the door, looking up at him.

“He did, but I can’t ask Josie to move again.”

He turns as well, copying my pose, and resting his shoulder against the wall. It puts him so much closer to me, so close I can feel the heat from his body on my arms.

I wonder what his reaction would be if I were to lean in and kiss him, but shove the crazy idea to the back of my mind for now.

“It would be a better area for both of you, and you know how Rhett is, he’ll pack your stuff and move you himself if he has to.”

“I know. I just need time to talk to Josie about it.”

The second I smile, his eyes drop to my mouth, and it sends a rush of heat straight to my core.

I’ve only slept with one guy and he never made me feel the way Logan makes me feel with just one look.

The door opens, shoving me right into Logan. His arms wrap around me, helping me keep my balance, as he moves me away from the door. My hands are flat against his abs, and feeling his muscles ripple under my fingertips, almost makes me moan.

I struggle to keep a hold of my composure as Beth peeks inside. When she sees us, she smiles as if she caught two kids sneaking around, which only makes me blush.

“How was the session?” she asks me, her eyes darting between Logan and me.

“Good,” I blurt out. I grab Logan’s hand and pick up the bag. “We were just on our way. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I know it’s rude that I don’t introduce Logan but I’m uncomfortable as it is with him knowing that I take pole dance lessons.

Only once we’re outside do I slow down and take a deep breath. The night is nice and cool, which is just what I need right now to cool off my overheating hormones.

The sidewalks are filled with people, which is awesome, because I have a reason to stick close to Logan’s side. He doesn’t pull his hand from mine but instead weaves our fingers together. I glance up at him as we walk to where he left his car, and seeing the corner of his mouth pull in a sexy grin makes me wish I could have just one night with him to act out my fantasies. Damn, I wouldn’t waste one second.

The only other time he’s held my hand was when he took me to the prom. Even though we haven’t had contact for so long, I still love him. I think everybody has that one person they never stop loving. Logan is my person.



Logan drives the short distance to my apartment and we go up so I can sign the documents and change for work.

It’s quiet when we walk into the apartment and I’m a little relieved that Josie’s not home. She made it clear she’s not happy with the guys suddenly being back in my life. I try to understand and see things from her point of view. She doesn’t know them the way I do.

“Take a seat. Can I get you something to drink?” I ask as I walk to the kitchen.

“Water please,” he says as he sits down on the only couch we have.

I know the place looks like a dump compared to Rhett’s apartment. I try

to see it through Logan's eyes. The secondhand couch and coffee table doesn't look too bad. The walls can do with a fresh coat of paint. I scrunch my nose, thinking it looks okay.

I pour him a glass of water, and when I walk back to where he is, I almost lose my breath at the sight of him looking all business like. He's still dressed in his work clothes minus the tie and jacket. He rolled up his sleeves at some point, but as he leans over the documents, I can only drool at the sight of him. Arm porn at it's best. My eyes follow the veins from his arms to his hands, and I quickly suppress a happy sigh.

I place the glass on the table and sit down next to him.

"It's just new copies of the original documents for you to sign. Rhett is still your beneficiary should something happen."

He takes a pen from his pocket and holds it out to me. As I take it he doesn't move away but instead leans closer to me while pointing to where I must sign. Every time either of us moves, our arms brush, sending tiny sparks racing over my skin.

When I'm done signing everything, I hold the pen out to him. He takes it as our eyes meet. Usually I'm quick to look away, but having Logan in my own place for the first time, gives me a new perspective on us, and what I want. I've done so many brave things in the past four years, why can't I be brave and make the first move?

"Has Rhett talked to you about working at Indie Ink?" His voice is low, sending more of those delicious shivers racing over my body.

It's so amazing sitting here with him that I have to focus hard on the actual conversation we're having.

"He has, but I'm not sure it's what I want to do."

He rests his forearms on his thighs, giving me his undivided attention. I copy his position and it makes our arms touch from shoulder to elbow. When

he doesn't move away, I take it as a very good sign.

“Have you thought about going back to college?”

“I'm not sure what to do. A week ago I was just hoping to get a better job that's during the day.”

Logan moves, bringing his right hand to my arm. The second his fingers brush lightly down my arm, I lose all train of thought.

“Why did you stop using the trust account?” His voice is even lower than before, not quite a whisper, which makes it sound deep and oh so sexy.

I drop my eyes to where he's touching me and stare at the goosebumps breaking out over my skin.

“I was hurting and not thinking. I wanted to prove to myself that I'd be okay on my own. Looking back I know it was stupid of me to do.” It's so easy being open with Logan. Right now, it really doesn't feel like we've spent any time apart. I actually feel closer to him now. Maybe it's because we're older.

He brings his hand to my face and tenderly cups my cheek. I can't fight the urge and I lean into his touch, soaking it in. Our eyes lock and I'm so caught up in the moment that I start to lean towards him, throwing all caution out the window. He moves his left arm from between us and places it behind me, and I take it as a sign that he's giving me full access.

His eyes drop to my mouth and my heart starts to beat wildly from the look of desire I see on his face.

This is happening. I'm not imagining things. Logan has to feel what I feel. This can't be one-sided.

The front door opens and I jerk away from Logan. I stand up when Josie comes in, feeling like I just got busted having sex.

“You're still here?” She looks at her watch and frowns. “It's almost nine, shouldn't you be at work?”

“Crap.” I rub over my face, knowing someone else already took my place.

“It’s funny how I had to beg you to go out with me the other night, but for him you don’t mind missing work,” she snaps and walks to her room. She slams the door shut.

What the hell just happened?

I’m just about to apologize to Logan for Josie’s rude behavior, when he says, “Can I give you some advice?” He gets up and places the documents back in the folder. “As a friend, who cares a lot about you, and as your attorney.”

For a moment all my mind can focus on is the part where he said he cares a lot about me.

Logan West cares about me. It’s an upgrade from like, right?

“My attorney?” I ask, and even though I’m missing work and my best friend is clearly pissed at me, I smile.

“It’s a package deal.” His smile fades and a serious look settles on his face. It’s one I haven’t seen often. “Right now you’re renting this place while working a dead-end job. I understand that you’re not sure about what you want to do, but that doesn’t mean you have to live here. Your share of the trust account is all there. You can buy a place, Mia. Right now you don’t have to work, but why don’t you come to Indie Ink even if it’s for a couple of months?”

I hear what he’s saying and I agree with it, but I feel guilty for even thinking it.

“Josie didn’t want to come to New York. She wanted to go to LA. She moved here for me.”

He brings his arm up and slips his hand behind my neck. Leaning down, he makes sure I’m looking at him.

I fight the urge to kiss him, and try to focus on what he’s saying.

“You can’t build your life around another person, Mia. You have to always do what’s best for you. If you make decisions based on what you think other people want from you, you will never be happy.”

“It’s hard, Logan.”

“I know, Sweetheart, but the hardest things in life will end up bringing you the most happiness.”

I should be listening to the advice he’s giving me but I got stuck on sweetheart. That’s the first time he’s called me anything else other than Mia.

When he leans in to hug me, all I can think about is kissing him. At the last second I chicken out and my lips skim over his cheek. I hug him tightly, and standing on my toes I bury my face in his neck.

“I want what’s best for you, Mia, and this is not it,” he whispers and it makes me tighten my hold on him.

He doesn’t let me go and we stand wrapped in each other’s arms for a few minutes longer.

I was in love with the boy but after tonight it’s clear that I’m obsessed with the man.

As I walk him to the door, I’m already thinking of ways to see him again.

“I left my business card on the table. It has my number and address on the back. If you need anything phone me.”

“I will. Thanks, Logan,” I say, meaning every word. “Thank you for always listening to me.”

“Anything for you.”

He always says the right thing. My heart never stood a chance. From the first moment I saw him, he owned it.

Before he leaves he presses a soft kiss to my cheek. His lips linger longer than it’s socially acceptable. The tingles remain long after I’ve closed the door behind him.

Chapter 6

Logan

I knock on the door, and when Rhett looks up, I walk into his office.

“I got the new documents signed last night, so that’s taken care of.”

He leans back in his chair. “For Mia?”

“Yeah.” I place the copies I made for him on his desk.

I take a deep breath, feeling exhausted from tossing and turning all night. I’ve been running different scenarios through my head, each one ending with Rhett beating the shit out of me for daring to look at his sister. This talk is inevitable though. I want Mia, and I’m ninety-nine percent sure she feels the same about me. I clear my throat and push through. It’s now or never.

“About Mia -”

“I’m worried about her,” Rhett interrupts me. “I don’t like that she’s living in Washington Heights and working at night.”

I let out the breath I was holding. “I spoke to her last night. I gave her some advice. She knows how we feel.”

“What do you think she’s going to do?” Rhett hasn’t stopped worrying since we first found out what had happened.

“I think she needs time to process it all, but she’ll make the right decision in the end.” I believe in Mia. She might be soft and caring, but she’s not someone who backs down.

“That friend of hers, whats-her-name, I don’t trust that chick.”

“Josie?” I agree with him there. I get crazy vibes from her. “I know what you mean. Last night, when she got home, she had a fit about Mia being late for work. I don’t think I’ve seen her be nice since we’ve met her.”

“What do we know about her?”

“Nothing ... yet. I’ll ask the PI to dig a little.” That reminds me. “He let me know that he can’t trace the phone. Whoever had it got rid of it.”

“Fuck! That was our only good lead of finding whoever’s fucking with Mia.”

“He did mention something interesting though,” I say when I see how despondent Rhett looks. “Why would someone hi-jack Mia’s social accounts, email, and phone? He thinks whoever did it, could’ve done it to alienate Mia in some way. You know, cut her off from everyone. This person almost succeeded in doing just that. It worries me, Rhett. If that’s really their goal, then what won’t they do to succeed?”

Rhett gets up, the look of despondency quickly replaced with one of worry and anger.

“That’s it. She’s moving today. If she has a fucking stalker, she’s a sitting duck out there.”

I stand up, wishing I could go with him. “Just tell her why you’re moving her. Don’t go in there guns blazing like you always do.”

“If it means she’s safe at the end of the day, I’ll do what I have to.”

I know he will, but it eats away at me that I’m not the one protecting her. Fuck, I’m still trying to deal with the fact that we didn’t talk for three years. To me it feels like there has been no break in our communication, but I have to keep reminding myself that it’s different for Mia. I just want to make it up to her and show her how much she means to me. I want to be the one she turns to when she needs something. I know I’m an idiot for thinking it. Rhett will always be a huge part of Mia’s life, but I’m selfish enough to admit that I

want to be the most important person in her life.

Walking back to my office, I want to kick myself. It drives me crazy having all these feelings for Mia and not being able to act on them. Every time I've tried to talk to Rhett about it, something happens, and we end up talking about everything but the fact that I want his blessing to be with Mia.

I respect and love Rhett, and fucking things up between us will break the whole group. The five of us have always done everything together. We're so tight because we know we can trust each other. It's not just about Mia and me. Breaking Rhett's trust will destroy the one thing all the guys in the group holds dearest. Trust.

Last night we were playing with fire. It was reckless of me to throw caution to the wind, but whenever I'm with her, I can't think clearly. I want to touch every part of her. I want to taste her. Fuck, I want to bury myself deep inside of her, so deep she'll be able to get me out.

I love Mia. As a teenager, I knew she was the one for me. As a man, it's time I make her mine.

That's why I need to talk to Rhett as soon as possible before I cross that line with Mia.

Chapter 7

Mia

I open the door and have to move back when Rhett storms into the apartment.

“Let’s pack your shit,” he growls.

I stare wide-eyed at his back as he walks deeper into the room. He scowls as he looks at everything.

“What’s yours?”

“I haven’t decided what I want to do yet,” I say, closing the door and walking over to him. I know he’s worried, but I won’t let him boss me around. I’m not a kid anymore and it’s time he realizes it.

“You’re not safe here, Mia. You’re moving in with me until you decide what you want.”

I tried to talk to Josie this morning. It didn’t go so well. Actually, that’s an understatement. She started throwing stuff around, screaming at me that I’m self-absorbed. Of course, I didn’t stand with a mouth full of teeth, but gave her a piece of my mind. I told her she’s changed since she’s moved here. I don’t even know who she is anymore.

I’ve just finished cleaning up the mess she made when Rhett knocked.

“Can you just give me today,” I ask, needing to talk to Josie. Our friendship is heading for a break that it might not recover from. I love Josie, and want to do everything in my power to make things right between us. “I promise I’ll be at your place tomorrow, but it will only be until I can find a

place of my own.”

“We’ve had someone digging around, and he thinks you have a stalker, Mia. Those fuckers are dangerous. If something were to happen -” His voice breaks and he pulls me into a hug.

I’ve missed this so much, it still aches just thinking about how close I came to never having it again.

“I’ll be careful. All I’m asking for is one day.”

He shakes his head, not looking happy at all, but then he relents. “One day, Mia. I’ll be here at nine tomorrow morning to get you. Do what you have to do today.”

~

I’ve been on edge the entire day, waiting for Josie to come back so we can talk. I feel like a horrible person, but I’ve been thinking about what Logan said last night. I didn’t ask Josie to move here with me but actually encouraged her to go to LA. I told her that I’d be okay living on my own and that our friendship wouldn’t suffer because of the distance.

After all, it’s not like we used to live together back in North Carolina. Josie insisted that I shouldn’t be alone in a big city like New York. I thought it would be fun to have her for a roommate, but this last week has been really hard.

I understand that she’s worried about me. She doesn’t have a close bond with her family, not the way Rhett and I have. I try to keep that in mind when we talk, but no matter how many times I explain that the guys will never hurt me intentionally, she doesn’t want to hear it.

It’s not like I’m ending our friendship. I’m just moving. Josie’s not hurting for money. She didn’t want to stay in this area, but because I wouldn’t let her pay for me, she relented. With me moving she’ll be able to

get her own place anywhere she wants.

The only thing I'll miss is living so close to the studio, but commuting won't be that bad.

I've also been thinking about taking that temporary job at Indie Ink. At least until I know what I really want to do for the rest of my life. I know the guys must think I'm being facetious about my future. That's not it at all. Choosing a field to work in is serious. I'll be doing it every day, and I want to love what I do.

I've already packed my stuff this afternoon. I left a lot of my things back in North Carolina. Once I have my own place I'll make the trip to get it all.

Josie walks in, yanking me from my thoughts. I get up from where I was sitting on the couch, praying she'll be reasonable.

She glares at my packed bags before she looks at me.

"Josie, can we please talk?"

There's an angry scowl on her face, and it makes me miss how carefree we used to be. I'm hoping once the dust has settled, we'll be able to go back to that.

For endless seconds she just stares at me, and it breaks my heart to see her so upset.

"You'll be able to get your own place. We'll still be friends like we were back in North Carolina. Nothing's going to change."

Slowly, she starts to walk towards me, a smile forming around her lips.

"I started to believe in you. I thought you were the one person who wouldn't use me. I should've known you were no different."

"What?" I let the word out on a shaky breath. "I've never used you. We are friends because I care about you."

"Care about me?" she hisses as she stops in front of me. "You call this caring about me? You dragged me here! I went against my parents for you,

and the first chance you get, you just shove me aside.”

“I never asked you to go against your parents, Josie. You made that choice. If I remember correctly, I even encouraged you to move to LA.”

“You begged me to come here!” she screams right in my face. I quickly take a step back, shocked by how fast this is escalating. “When they threw you aside like trash, I was the only one who took care of you.”

“Took care of me?” My mind is spinning right now. “I took care of myself, Josie.”

The slap rings in my ears before I realize what happened. Shocked to my core, I bring my hand up to my cheek. I can’t believe she just slapped me.

The look on her face is alarming, her breaths racing through her clenched teeth, but I won’t back down.

When she takes a threatening step towards me, I shove her away from me. She stumbles a few steps back before falling on her backside. No matter how hard I try, I can’t contain my anger.

“What the fuck, Josie? I don’t even know who you are anymore. I really wanted to do this the nice way, but it’s clear there’s no reasoning with you. We’re done.”

I turn away and walk to where I left my bags earlier this afternoon. I reach for one when she shoves me from behind, causing me to fall forward against the wall. All the exercise has made me more agile, and I quickly gain my balance. As I spin around, she lifts her hand to slap me again, but this time I’m prepared. I bring my arm up, knocking hers away, and then I’m in her face.

“Try that again. I dare you,” I hiss. Never in my life have I been this angry before.

“I was the one who listened to your endless self-pitying!” she shrieks.

I ground my teeth together to keep the anger in. She wants this fight. She

wants me to lose control, to be like her.

“I’m done. I won’t lower myself to your level.”

I grab my bags and yank the door open. I slam the door as hard as I can behind me, just to get rid of some of the anger.

I can’t make sense of what just happened. I’ve never seen Josie lose all control like that before. I guess you don’t really know a person until you live with them.

As my anger drains away, I feel the tears prick behind my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall.

I’m sad that things ended so badly between Josie and me.



I keep my head down and make sure my hair covers my face as I walk into the building, not wanting to draw attention to myself. I guess that’s a moot point seeing as I’m dragging two bags behind me and carrying one on each shoulder.

On the way over, my emotions were all over the place, going from distraught to disoriented to angry on a constant loop.

Placing the bags next to the door, I knock quickly before wrapping my arms around my middle. I glance down the hallway, not really taking in any of my surroundings.

When the door starts to open, I push my way in as the little control I have over my turbulent emotions break. I bury myself against him, needing to feel safe. I wrap my arms around his waist and hold him with all my strength while hiding my face in his chest.

I breathe him in, filling my lungs and battered soul with the stillness and strength that makes him the man I love with every ounce of me.

Chapter 8

Logan

I open the door, thinking it's one of the guys. A flash of black hair pushes past the door, and my surprise quickly morphs to worry as Mia wraps her arms around me.

Her whole body trembles as she presses her face to my chest.

I see the bags from over her head, and keeping one arm around her, I bring them in before shutting the door.

Holding her, I press my lips to the top of her head. Questions race through my mind, each one adding to my worry.

It's clear she needs me to hold her right now, and that thought makes my heart want to fill until it feels like it's going to burst.

She came to me. I was the person she thought of first when she needed someone most.

I close my eyes, letting the moment soak in. Only when her trembling lessens, do I bring my hand to her hair. I brush it away from the side of her face and neck, pressing my lips to the side of her face.

I keep my mouth against her soft skin, and whisper, "Talk to me."

She turns her head until her cheek is resting against my chest and it brings my lips to her forehead. I keep caressing her hair, while my other arm remains tightly wrapped around her.

"I tried to talk to Josie. She wouldn't listen and lost her temper," she whispers. I hate hearing how upset she is.

I know there's more to it than those two sentences. I bring my hands to

her face so she'll look at me, but when my eyes drop to the red mark on her face, anger makes me see red.

“Did she hit you?” I take her hand and pull her to the kitchen. I stay busy, taking a frozen steak from the freezer and wrapping it in the first towel I see, trying to get control over the rage I feel.

I put it aside, then taking hold of Mia's hips, I lift her onto the counter. I pick up the poor excuse for an ice pack, and lightly brush my fingers over the bruise before gently pressing the towel to it.

With my free hand, I take hold of her hip, and push my way between her legs. I lean into her, needing to be as close to her as possible right now. Knowing someone hit the women I love is killing me.

She brings her hand to her face and places it over mine, while her other takes hold of my side. I take another step forward until our bodies touch, pressing a kiss to the side of her neck.

I know I'm supposed to keep my distance from her until I've had a chance to talk to Rhett, but fuck it's next to impossible.

When Mom decided she no longer wanted to be a mother and shoved us off on Mr. Hayes, Mia's was the first smile I saw.

This is the girl who trusted me with her secrets, who let me be the first to kiss her, let me take her to the prom. She was the one who sat next to me studying until late at night just to let me know I wasn't alone.

Jaxson might be my twin, and we're very close, but we dealt with Mom taking off differently. Mia was the one who understood that I just needed someone to be there, quietly sitting with me while I tried to make sense of it all.

“What happened, Sweetheart,” I ask, needing to hear it all.

“I tried to tell her that I'm moving, but she just lost it. She started ranting, but it escalated so quickly. I was shocked when she slapped me. I pushed her

so hard she fell to the floor. You know I'm not violent. I hate that I lost control. She kept on ranting and coming at me until, and I realized that's what she wanted. She wanted me to fight and I won't sink to that level. I took my bags and left. I only realized I was coming here when I reached your building. I'm sorry for just barging in on you, but ...” she lets out a breath, then whispers, “I needed to see you.”

I pull back a little so I can see her eyes. I want to kiss her until she forgets about Josie and the fight. Fuck, I want to strip her down and make sure she's not hurt anywhere else.

But Rhett.

“I'm glad you came to me. It sucks that it's because you had a fight with Josie, but I'm glad nonetheless.”

She moves her hand down, taking hold of my wrist. Her eyes drop to my mouth. Her teeth pulls at her bottom lip, making me instantly hard.

“We need to talk about this,” I say, meaning ‘us’.

She nods but waits for me to go on. Her fingers tighten on my side.

“I want more with you, Mia, but I need to talk to Rhett first. It wouldn't be right for me to act on my feelings for you without talking to him.”

Her tongue darts out, wetting her lips, which makes me want to lean closer so I can taste them for myself.

“Feelings?” she whispers, her cheeks flushing lightly with color.

“Yeah.” I search her face hoping I'm right and that she does want more with me, too.

“So, you care about me, but you're holding back because of that stupid rule Rhett made when I was eighteen?”

I can hear that she wants to argue about the rule, so I quickly explain, “He threatened to kill us if any of us so much as thought about touching you. But I'm not holding back because of the rule, Mia. I need to talk to him because

it's the right thing to do. He's a huge part of both our lives. We owe him a heads up before we take this further."

She pulls my hand holding the pack away from her face, and I'm relieved to see that it already looks better.

"Just to make sure I understand," she whispers as she brings her hand up to my shoulder. "You feel this too?"

"I feel it too," I say, smiling. I'm glad that's out there now. "I don't want to be just your friend, Mia. I want you. I want to fucking kiss you so badly it's taking all my strength to hold back."

"You're not allowed to touch me, but Rhett never told me to stay away from any of you."

I frown not following her.

"Which means I'm allowed to touch you," she spells it out for me.

My smile grows, and I should tell her that we still need to talk to Rhett first, but then she leans forward and presses her mouth to my jaw. She brings her hands to my neck and lets out a soft groan when her fingers press lightly against my skin. With her lips, she leaves a scorching trail to my chin, then down my neck, and only stopping when she's blocked by my shirt.

"Mia," I warn her, my voice low with need.

"Shh." It's barely a sound as she takes hold of my shirt and pulls it over my head.

"You came here upset. I don't want you to regret anything tomorrow."

She pushes against me until I take a step back, then she slides off the counter. Taking hold of my hand, she pulls me to the bedroom.

I'm just about to stop whatever she has in mind when she turns to me and says, "Let me sleep by you, Logan. Let me touch you. I won't push for more. I respect the fact that you want to talk to Rhett first, but I need this. I need to be here with you. I know it's selfish of me to ask, but it's what I want. I've

wanted it for so long, and finally knowing that you feel the same way about me... I don't have it in me to wait a second longer."

I love how honest she is, never afraid to speak her mind.

When she takes her shirt off, I groan out loud. I'm going to be hard as fuck all night long. She has an alluring smile playing around her lips as she shoves her shorts down.

I let my eyes slowly move down her body, taking in every inch of bare skin, and that's when it sinks in. Mia feels the same. She wants more between us.

When her hands drop to my jeans, I bring my hand up to her face. I feel her breath on my chest while her fingers work to get the zip down.

I let her push the jeans down my legs and step out of them. I tell myself as long as I don't kiss her or take her the way I'm burning to take her, we're not crossing any lines.

I frame her face with my hands and lean down until I can feel her breath on my lips. With my thumbs, I trace the line of her lips, mesmerized by how soft they are.

She takes a shuddering breath which weakens my self-control to breaking point.

When she lifts herself on her toes, I turn my face away, and our lips brush over each other's cheeks instead of meeting.

"Once I kiss you I won't be able to stop. I want our first time to be special, without worrying what Rhett's reaction might be."

She lowers herself and takes hold of my hand, pulling me to the bed. When I lie down I watch as her eyes drop to the hard-on tenting my boxers. I can't hide my body's reaction from her.

She follows me, crawling onto the bed and up my body. For the first time, I wonder if she's had sex and the thought of another man taking her

virginity burns a hole in my heart.

She presses a kiss to my abs, and I have to close my eyes, so I don't flip her over and rip her underwear off. She keeps torturing me, kissing her way up my chest until she reaches my neck. She takes a deep breath as she lies down on top of me, bringing her hand to the side of my neck. I wrap my arms around her, enjoying the feel of finally being skin on skin with her.

Chapter 9

Mia

My life is a mess right now and lying here with Logan like this is the only thing I'm sure of.

If I weren't so exhausted I would've tried harder to change his mind about kissing me. I understand that it's important for him to talk to Rhett, and I certainly don't want to be the reason they fight.

Besides, the anticipation between us is an amazing feeling.

I move until only half of my body is over his, and when I bring my leg up, my thigh brushes over the hard bulge in his boxers. His breath comes out in a rush and he tightens his arm around my waist.

I let my hand brush down his chest and over his abs, watching as his muscles clench at my touch. When I near his boxers he grabs my hand and brings it back to his chest.

Seducing him is quickly becoming addictive. I love seeing his reaction to me. It's an indescribable high.

When you've wanted something for the better part of your life, and you finally get to have it ... there's no feeling like it in the world.

"Can I ask you something?" I whisper as I settle into his side for the night.

"Sure." He lets my hand go, placing his arm under his head.

"When you taught me how to kiss and took me to the prom, did you do it

because you were being nice to me, or because you wanted to?”

I lift my head, so I can see his reaction to my question. He turns his face to me, a sexy smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Because I wanted to,” he answers without even thinking about it. “I kissed you because I couldn’t stand the thought of another guy taking your first kiss. I took you to the prom because I wanted to spend every possible moment with you.”

How can I not love him, when he always says exactly what I want to hear? It’s as if he can see right into my heart.

“When you left it felt like you forgot about me,” I admit to him.

“I could never forget you. It’s like forgetting to breathe, and that’s just not a possibility.”

I let out a happy sigh as I press a kiss over his heart before closing my eyes.

Falling asleep in his arms is everything ... it’s heaven. It’s the first night I don’t have to fantasize about him, and I have to admit, there’s nothing like the real thing.



When I wake up, I’m alone in bed. I get up and slip my shorts and shirt on before going to the bathroom. I quickly do my thing, using my fingers to brush my hair and teeth.

I walk to the kitchen and my heart skips a beat at the delicious sight of Logan dressed for work. Man, he fills a suit like no other. But, as good as he looks in it I can’t wait to strip it off him.

I walk to where he’s busy making coffee, and by the time he notices me, I’m reaching for the two pieces of his tie hanging loosely around his neck.

“Morning,” I say as I quickly do his tie. I used to take advantage of any

reason to touch him, and teaching him how to make his tie was only one of the thousand ways.

When it's done, I stand on my toes and press a kiss to his cheek, almost touching the corner of his mouth.

He brings his hand to my face, and like the night before, he caresses the line of my lips with his thumb.

"I loved waking up with you in my arms," he whispers, sending shivers racing down my spine.

"I'm moving in with Rhett today, so until you talk to him, there won't be much of that happening," I voice my concern. As badly as I want him, I also understand that talking with Rhett is something he has to do.

His eyes meet mine and the determination I see in them warms my heart.

"I'll talk to him."

I hate that the pressure is on his shoulders. "I can talk to him while we're moving my stuff," I offer.

Logan shakes his head. "No, it's my place to talk to him. I need to ask his blessing so I can corrupt his sister," he teases, taking the sting out of the tension.

After we've had coffee, I leave so I can get to Rhett's place before he leaves. Logan carries the heavy bags to his car, while I carry the two smaller ones.

He holds the passenger door to his Audi open for me. Once I've settled in the seat, he takes hold of the seatbelt and holds it out for me. I'm not going to lie, I love the attention and can't stop smiling as he walks around to the drivers' side.

The car and apartment is so Logan, practical but stylish.

The drive to Rhett's place is done in silence. It's comfortable and just another one of the many things I love about Logan. There's not need to fill

the silence.

When we get to Rhett's door, Logan takes my face in his hands and presses a kiss to my forehead. Without breaking contact, he trails his mouth down the side of my face, but stops just short of my mouth. I groan in frustration which makes him smile.

"Soon," he whispers, breathing the word against my tingling mouth. I lick my lips, wanting to taste the word, and accidentally brush the tip of my tongue over the swell of his bottom lip.

"Fuck," he groans, first licking, then biting his lip.

It's easily the hottest thing I've ever seen. If he wanted to I'd let him take me right here in the hallway.

Not even thinking about what I'm doing, I trail the tip of my finger over his bottom lip, taking some of the wetness left behind by his tongue. I bring my finger to my mouth, hoping to get a taste of him.

His eyes darken as they follow my finger into my mouth. When I suck, he groans, and dropping his hands to my hips, he yanks my body flush with his.

I feel his hard length pressing into my stomach which makes my panties instantly wet.

"You're not playing fair," he growls.

Knowing he's hard because of something I did, is a heady thought. It makes me want to see how far I can push him before he gives in.

"All's fair in love and war."

A sexy grin pulls at the corner of his mouth. "War?"

"Yeah, the war is on until we get to make love. Fair warning, I won't take it easy on you."

"Is that so?" he growls. He brings a finger to my neck and then lightly trails a straight line over my nipple until he reaches my hip. "I look forward to it."

Taking hold of my hand, he lifts it to his mouth. Thinking he's going to kiss the back of it, I'm surprised when he sucks my finger into his mouth. He bites the tip lightly before letting go of me.

"I better go," he whispers. "I'll call you later."

I watch him walk away and wait until the elevator closes behind him, before I knock on Rhett's door.

When the door opens, I smile. "Surprise."

Rhett doesn't return my smile, but instead scowls.

"What the fuck happened to your face?"

"I got in a fight with Josie." I answer him honestly.

"The bitch laid her hands on you?"

I can see where this is going and I need to stop it now. "I handled it, Rhett. I'm not a little girl anymore. Can you help me with the bags?" I hope he hears the words and realizes I'm a grown woman.

"Mia, sorry to tell you this but you'll always be my little sister," he says as he brings the bags inside.

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes at him, knowing it won't help my case of being an adult.

When he places the bags at the foot of the bed, he says, "I'll message you the contact details for the agent who helped us get our places when we moved here. Also, there are two positions you can choose from at Indie Ink. Before you tell me to shove them, hear me out -"

"Logan already talked to me about working at Indie Ink on a temporary basis. I'm good with that, so lay it on me, what are the two positions?"

I can see that I surprised him by not arguing.

"Remind me to thank Logan," he mumbles. "One is being a PA for me, and the other is being on reception."

"Well that's an easy choice," I say, scrunching my nose. "I'll take

reception.”

He looks offended, and I fight to not burst out with laughter. “Why don’t you want to be my PA?”

“No offense, Rhett, but you’re too full of shit. You’d drive me crazy. I’m your sister, remember. You’re one of those perfectionists who needs everything done a certain way. No, thank you. I’m not a sucker for punishment.”

He laughs, knowing I’m right. Plus, we’d just work on each other’s nerves. I love my brother with all my heart, but I’ll never work closely with him.

“Take today to get settled and set up an appointment with the agent. There will be two of you on reception. I’ll tell Melissa to expect you tomorrow. I have a meeting in the UK, so I’ll be leaving tomorrow for a few days.”

“Do you go overseas a lot?” I ask.

“Not that much, but we’re busy with a merger, so it needs my attention in person.”

“How long will you be gone for?”

“Just a few days. If you need anything, phone Logan.”

I smile at that. I wonder if Rhett even realizes that subconsciously he only trusts Logan when it comes to me. Little does he know...

I spent the day getting settled into Rhett’s guest room and make an appointment with Suzie, the agent. She said she has a few places she can show me that she thinks I’ll be interested in.

Secretly I’m hoping that I won’t have to buy my own place but that I’ll be moving in with Logan soon. We’ve known each other forever, so it’s not like we have to get to know each other first. There’s nothing I want more than being able to spend every night in his arms.

I sit on my bed reliving the night before. Logan was so gentle with me. It was the happiest moment of my life when he told me how he felt about me, and that he'll talk to Rhett. I don't know what I'll do if Rhett has a problem with us dating.

My thoughts turn to Josie, and I touch the corner of my mouth that's still tender from where she slapped me.

I get up and walk over to my phone, and when I see that I have a message, I smile, hoping it's from Logan.

It's from Josie and what I read makes my smile die a quick death.

Josie: Fuck you, bitch! Fuck you. Fuck Rhett. Fuck Carter. Fuck Jaxson. Fuck Marcus. Fuck Logan. You fucked me over, just like those assholes did. I'm going to make you all pay.

I can feel the rage coming right through the message. I'm so upset that I can't read it again.

I can't believe what I just read. I try to remember if there were signs that Josie was a bitch all along, but I can't think of anything. Up until we moved to New York she was really a good friend. Is my judgment of people so off that I can't see the difference between a good person and an asshole?

~

The second Rhett gets home I show him the message.

"What does she mean by I fucked her over?" I know he's not talking to me, but the second he says the words out loud I think of something.

"Rhett, did you have sex with her?" I hate asking my brother that question, not wanting to know anything about his sex life.

"How the fuck should I know," he snaps as he scowls at me. "I can't remember half the women I've been with."

"Totally oversharing right there," I say, pulling a mock horrified face. "Do you think Marcus still has the screw crew list?"

I hate that they have a list. Even though I want to know if Josie's name is on Rhett's list, I still hope that he'll tell me they've thrown it away.

"How do you know about the list?" Rhett asks, surprise flickering in his eyes.

"I hate to disappoint you, brother, but it wasn't exactly a state secret."

"Marcus has the list," he says, not looking happy that I know about their deep, dark secret.

"Ask him to send you the list and check if Josie's name is on it. That will explain a lot."

"You think she became friends with you to get back at me?"

"Crazier things have happened when it comes to you and your friends. I hate to think that she used me, but it would explain her recent behavior. I hope I'm wrong though."

Marcus just emailed Rhett the list, and I watch his face for any signs as he reads over it. He frowns and I can't keep quiet anymore.

"What? Is she on the list or not?"

He leans forward looking really confused. "Carter screwed her," he says, but I can see his eyes are still skimming the page, then he says, "Fuck, Marcus did as well." The confusion quickly gives way to anger. "How the fuck did she get it right to fuck us all? We have a rule that none of us bangs the same chick."

"Eww..." I'm going to gag thinking that they all practically shared Josie.

"Wait. What?"

My whole body jerks when I realize he said *'all'*.

"What do you mean all of you?"

I get up, and rush to stand behind him. The list of names is sickening to see, and for the first time in my life, I'm disappointed in Rhett. My eyes fly over the all the names listed under Carter, then Rhett, then Marcus, then

Jaxson. My heart sinks painfully like a stone when I see the list beneath Logan's name. It's not as long as the other's but it's more than I can count on one hand, and one of the names is Josie.

I don't realize I'm crying until I feel Rhett's hand on my cheek. I jerk away from him, not wanting him to touch me.

"How could you? Those are actual people, Rhett! They are women with feelings. How could you be with so many?"

I grab my phone and turn my back to Rhett, quickly typing out a message to Josie.

Mia: Did you befriend me to get back at the guys because they all slept with you?

It's a bold question but one I deserve an answer to.

I watch as one tick appears next to the message, showing it's been delivered, then a second tick indicating that she's reading it. Little bubbles start to dance over the screen, as she replies.

You actually thought I was your friend? How fucking gullible of you. You're their untouchable little princess. The only woman worth something to them. PS. I paid Connor to sleep with you. Now you know how I felt. I stole your phone so you would know what it's like when they throw you away like yesterday's trash. It hurts like a bitch, doesn't it?

I cover my mouth to keep the cry in. Rhett grabs my phone from me and reads the message. His face pales and when he looks at me, I can only shake my head.

I have no words for the disappointment I feel. I feel used and dirty, knowing Connor took my virginity because Josie paid him to.

When Rhett reaches for me, I shake my head again, stepping out of his reach.

I can't look at him any longer and go to my room. I struggle to hold it

together until I close the door behind me.

I don't know who hurt me more. Rhett or Logan?

Seeing all those names on Logan's list makes me wonder if what we have is even real. He won't even kiss me, but he gave himself so easily to six other women.

Where all his words just empty promises so he could add me to his list?

Chapter 10

Logan

Rhett phoned, sounding out of his mind with worry. All I know is that it's got something to do with Mia.

Did Rhett find out about Mia and me? Even if he did, I'll face whatever's coming. Not being able to wait for the elevator, I take the stairs two at a time up to his apartment. When I walk inside, I'm surprised to see Carter there.

"Is Mia okay?" I ask, not caring about anything else.

Rhett turns away from the window, and when I see that he's been crying, my heart almost stops.

"What happened? Where's Mia?"

It's amazing how many bad scenarios can flash through your head in less than ten seconds. Anything from a car accident to Mia being missing. Every single scenario leaves my gut more twisted than the one before.

"She's in her room," he says, his voice raw. I've never seen Rhett so broken before, but I'm filled with relief, knowing that she's here. "Josie is on the screw crew list."

I frown, not understanding what that has to do with anything.

"We all fucked her," Carter spits it out as if it's leaving a bad taste in his mouth just saying the words.

"What?"

"You all had sex with Josie," Mia says softly from where she's standing

outside the room. Her eyes are red and she's clutching a tissue in a death grip. I can't remember a time where she looked even half upset as she does right now.

I want to hold her and promise that everything will be okay, but before I can take a step towards her Jaxson and Marcus come in, looking worried.

"Hey, what's up?" Marcus asks.

Mia looks at Marcus and Jaxson, then Carter. "Because you all used her she thought she could get back at you all by using me."

I don't like the tone of Mia's voice and I'm still not following what she's saying. It's scaring the shit out of me, seeing her so upset.

I start towards her, needing to hold her, but she holds up her hand while taking deep breaths. It looks like she's going to be sick.

"Don't. Just don't, Logan." Her voice is hauntingly raw, and it's killing me to see her like this. "Josie stole my phone so she could cut me off from everyone I loved. She pretended to be my friend, most probably so she could have a front row seat to my pain."

She shakes her head and then she looks at Rhett. Her eyes look like crushed leaves as they drown in pain.

"You all had sex with her," she whispers, her voice cracking over the words, like a dying fire that's being drowned out by a storm.

Then she looks at me, and it feels as if someone is gutting me. "You had sex with Josie." This time her voice is clear and strong, and somehow that makes it hurt more.

"I have no words to describe how used I feel. How disappointed I am." She walks to Marcus and only then does she start to cry. "You started the list, Marcus. Because of you turning women into nothing but a list of names that were used, Josie paid a guy to sleep with me. That guy took my virginity. It might not mean anything to you, but to me ..." Her voice disappears on a sob

before she forces the rest out. “I feel dirty and used. I hope it was worth it.”

Marcus looks like he’s going to puke. I think we all feel that way.

I’ve never seen Mia like this. She’s always been the one to see the good in every situation. I know there’s no way of finding a sliver of good in this fucking mess, but my mind still races as it try to think of a way to make it all go away.

Mia’s phone rings and it helps to break us out of stupor.

Instead of answering it privately, she puts it on speaker.

“What do you want?” she hisses, and it sounds wrong coming from Mia.

“How does it feel?” Josie sneers.

Mia tries to say something but a sob cuts her off. She takes a few quick breaths, swallowing hard on the tears. She covers her face with her hand and seeing her fight to not break down brings life to my body. I rush over to her and take the phone out of her hand.

“How does it fucking feel?” Josie screams.

“Josie,” Marcus starts to talk.

She cuts him off, grinding the words out, “I’m not talking to you! I want to know how Mia feels. How does it feel to know that I had Logan inside me, that the guy who taught you how to kiss because he had to, willingly stuck his tongue down my throat?”

“Hurt,” Mia whispers. “I feel hurt, and used, and dirty, and sick to my stomach, and ...” Her voice breaks but she pushes through, each word slaying me. “What kind of person pretends to be someone’s friend for four years? How could you do that to me? Paying Conner ... you saw how much that hurt me. You need professional help, Josie. You’re insane.”

Josie laughs bitterly. “I’m insane? Princess, you haven’t seen my crazy side yet.”

The line goes dead, leaving us all rooted to the spot.



Rhett is standing by the front door, blocking it so Mia can't leave. She won't let any of us near her. After the call she stopped crying. Her fists are balled at her side with rage. I don't know which is worse, watching Mia cry because of something we did, or watching her shut down, blocking us all out.

Jaxson walks closer to her, and she takes a step away from him. She looks like a cornered animal. I shove my hands into my hair wishing there was something I could do to make this disappear.

“Mia,” Jaxson whispers. “What can I say to make this better?”

“Give me one name, Jax,” Mia snaps, clearly hanging on by a thin thread. It looks like she's caught in a battle between feeling heartbroken and angry.

“Leigh Baxter, Josie Peterson, Paige Sanders, Jennifer Blake, Penny Wade, Jill Adams, Bethany Doss and Simone Lawless.”

Mia looks at Jaxson for the first time, and I'm surprised to see that she's not about to rip his head off so she can spit down his throat. A tear slips down her cheek, and when she lets Jaxson hold her, I'm shocked.

She cries in my brother's arms, and I should take comfort in the fact that she's letting someone near her, but it fucking hurts.

When she pulls away from Jaxson she looks at Rhett, and he immediately says, “I can't remember their names. I'm sorry, Mia. I fucked up. I was in college, dicking around. Each one of them came on to me. It didn't matter who they were because it was mutual. I can tell you that I've never made a promise or indicated that it was more than just sex.”

Mia nods but she doesn't step away from Jaxson's side.

“I can't say that I'm not disappointed, Rhett. I have no say over what you do and who you sleep with, it just hurts that you're so shameless about it. Your reckless actions had a direct impact on my life. You got to fuck them,

while I got fucked in return.”

Rhett slides down the wall until his ass hits the floor. He buries his head in his hands, clearly shaken by Mia’s words.

“Mia, you know I’m a fucking mess,” Marcus says, looking remorseful. “I was eighteen when I started that list, and we stopped that shit when we were done with college. Like Rhett said, it was mutual. Every single one of those girls knew what they were getting themselves into. I’m sorry that our fucking around had a backlash on you.”

A bitter chuckle bursts over her lips. “Backlash,” she whispers. “Is that what you call it?”

Not sparing Marcus another thought, her eyes swing to Carter.

“Hey, don’t look at me. You know I’ve fucked up most.”

“You’re right, Carter. I would expect something like this from you but the fact that you don’t care, that’s heartless even for you.”

Carter’s face turns to stone and I know this situation is going to go from fucked-up to fucked-sideways-with-a-pineapple, really fast.

“I’m not saying that I don’t care, Mia. I’m saying that I know I fucked up, especially where Della is concerned. But I’m not that person anymore. I have a family now.”

“I don’t want to fight with you,” Mia whispers, looking exhausted.

“No, lay it on me. I want to hear how you feel.”

“Fuck, Carter,” I snap. “Who the fuck do you think you’re talking to?”

He takes a deep breath and quickly reigns in his temper. “You’re right.”

He walks to where Mia is, and I know this is hard for him, but I won’t have him disrespecting Mia. Fuck, it’s hard for all of us.

“I’m sorry, Mia. You know you’re like a sister to me. I’d never do anything to hurt you. Not intentionally. I was a dick in college, and I’m sorry it bit you in the ass. I can’t change what happened, but I am sorry.”

Her chin quivers and she looks so sad it even melts Carter's frozen heart.

"Mia, I love you," he whispers as he carefully pulls her into a hug.

"Fuck, bro, you're making me cry," Marcus mutters, actually wiping tears from his eyes.

Jaxson is the first to laugh, and it goes a long way to easing the tension in the room.

Carter pulls back, flips Marcus off, then looks back to Mia. "Are we good?"

"Yeah," she says, while wiping her tears away.

"Good, then I'm going home. I promised Danny that I'd read her a bedtime story tonight."

Rhett slowly pulls himself up against the wall. It looks like he's gone to war and lost, as he walks to Mia.

"If I could turn back time, I'd become a fucking monk for you. I can't change what I've done and I know me saying I'm sorry, won't make it all magically right. I can promise you that I'm going to make Josie pay."

Mia lets out another bitter chuckle. "How, Rhett? We have no physical proof."

"Let me worry about that. I'll find a way. I promise you that her crazy ass will never get close to you again."

Mia stares at the floor for a long while, then she starts to scroll through her contacts, which instantly has me taking a step closer to her.

"Don't phone her, Mia. You'll play right into her hand."

She flicks her eyes at me. "I'm not phoning her."

She turns her back on me and it feels like I'm watching the only door to all my dreams being nailed shut.

"Mr. Peterson? It's Mia Daniels. You need to come to New York."

We all watch as Mia tells Mr. Peterson everything that's happened over

the past four years. It hurts just as much hearing it now, as it did the first time.

Mr. Peterson says something, to which Mia replies, “The only way you can make this better is by coming to get your daughter. You can’t pay me to go away. If you don’t, I will go to the police. You’re not the only one with money. I’ll hire the best attorneys to destroy your name the way your daughter tried to destroy me. You have a week. I want confirmation that she’s in LA, and that you’re getting her professional help.”

She switches her phone off and throws it on the coffee table as if it’s a burning lump of coal.

Rhett places a hand on her shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “That was badass.”

“She hates her parents. It’s the best revenge I could think of.”

“Badass and clever,” Rhett says, as he gives Mia a pleading look. “Hopefully, forgiving too?”

Mia shakes her head at him but says, “I might forgive you, but I’m still angry.”

She lets him pull her into a hug, and I can almost feel the relief coming off Rhett.

“I can live with that.” When he pulls back he glares at me. “What’s this about you teaching my sister to kiss?”

Oh fuck.

“And that’s my queue to hit the road,” Marcus says. He looks at Mia, “I love you, babe. You know that right?”

“Yeah, love you too, Marcus.”

Then he looks at me. “Good luck, bro. It was nice knowing you.”

I shake my head, and I can’t help but laugh as Jaxson runs after Marcus. “Yo, wait up.”

“And then there were three of us,” I mumble to myself. I wait for Rhett to shut the front door before I say, “I love Mia.” I realize it doesn’t quite have the same ring to it after Carter and Marcus just said the same thing. “I don’t mean as a sister. I mean it in that all-consuming way. Mia’s the one I want to go to bed with, and wake up with, and do everything with. I love your sister, Rhett.”

“Shit,” Rhett says, and I’m not sure whether it’s a good shit or bad shit. “Dude, I want to say yes -” My heart fucking stops as Rhett shakes his head, placing his hands on his hips. “I swear, if that was a proposal, even I would consider saying yes, but you’re telling the wrong person how you feel. It’s not up to me.”

“Mia knows how I feel about her. I didn’t want to start a relationship without getting your blessing.”

Rhett holds out his hand to me, and for the first time tonight I manage to take a deep breath. I shake his hand, and I start to feel really emotional when I see approval in his eyes.

“I’ll leave you two to talk,” he says, then walks over to Mia. “We’ll talk some more tomorrow. I know you’re disappointed in me and I’m sorry.”

She nods, giving him a trembling smile as he presses a kiss to her forehead.

I wait until he closes the bedroom door behind him before I take a step towards Mia.

“I always thought this would be the happiest moment of my life,” she whispers, and when our eyes meet, and I see such intense pain shining from them, it cripples me. It feels like the ground is ripping open beneath my feet.

“Don’t do this,” I beg, walking right up to her. I take her face in my hands and lean down to kiss her, but she turns her head away and gives me her cheek.

Taking hold of my wrists, she pulls my hands away from her face, and whispers, “When you taught me how to kiss it was a dream come true. I had the biggest crush on you, and there you were, kissing me. Did you know that I held on to my virginity for you? I wanted you to have all my firsts.”

Tears start so silently fall over her cheeks, and when I reach for her face, she takes a step back. I close my eyes because this hurts too fucking much.

“Josie paid Connor to sleep with me. After you all left, I met him in the cafeteria. He was funny and charming. He was on the football team, and an obvious catch by the way girls threw themselves at him. He actually made me feel special. We dated for three months. I really liked him and he helped fill a small part of the gaping hole you all left in my life.”

I don’t want to hear this, but I force myself to listen.

“I gave him my virginity.” Her voice cracks just like my heart, and she clears her throat before going on, “As soon as he had his orgasm, he got up and got dressed. It was the first time I had sex. I had no idea what to do afterwards. I guessed getting dressed was the next logical step, but then he said I was only a fuck. I was just another warm hole for him to get off in. But hey, he’d be sure to tell all of the guys on the team that it only took a few dinners to get me on my flat on my back.”

I close my eyes as the pain fills every inch of me.

“You all get to say you’re sorry, and that’s it. You get to go back to your lives, but I can’t. I have to live with the memory of being used.”

I press the palms of my hands hard against my eyes, trying to breathe past the pain.

“There’s nothing I can say that will make this better.” The words burn their way up my throat and I know I’m minutes away from puking.

“I’ll tell Rhett tomorrow,” she whispers. “Logan,” she waits for me to look at her and I can’t keep the tears back any longer. “I love you. It feels like

I've loved you all my life. It's hard to accept that the worst thing that happened to me is because of something the best thing to happen to me did. I need time to wrap my mind around that. As much as I love you, I don't know if I can get past that. I need time to process it all. Can you give me time?"

I suck in a breath of air, and it still feels like I'm suffocating. Slowly, I lean down and closing my eyes, I press a kiss to her trembling lips. It's a quick kiss. A I'm-so-fucking-sorry-I-hurt-you-kiss.

When I pull back, I whisper, "I'll never forgive myself. You deserve better than me, and I hope you find it. You're going to make some lucky bastard very happy one day."

I walk away from her, knowing I said the same thing after I kissed her the first time. It's because I'm right back where I was then, with Mia being out of my reach.

Chapter 11

Mia

I haven't slept. I've been sitting on the couch trying to make sense of it all. I had to tell Logan so he'd understand why I was reacting so strongly, but I didn't mean to hurt him. I just needed more time to think about my life, both the past and the future. I don't want to start a relationship with this cloud hanging over our heads. Now I don't have to worry about starting a relationship at all because Logan walked out of here making it very clear that it's over between us before it even started.

Rhett comes out of his room, and I wait for him to make some coffee.

I let my eyes drift over his apartment, wondering what the walls would say if they could talk. How many dreams have they seen come true? How many hearts have they seen shatter to pieces.

The expensive leather couch. The huge TV that takes up half the wall. Every piece of carefully selected art. None of it matters. It's all a mask to keep people from seeing the soul who lives here.

My eyes go back to Rhett, and I watch as he walks towards me. His stride is confident. My brother is attractive. I've had girls ask me for his number. Some even begged me to put in a good word for them.

To the outside world it looks like Rhett Daniels has it all. Good looks, a healthy bank balance, a closer circle of friends.

If you look deeper, you'll see the pain he keeps hidden from the world.

The pain of failing his sister. The pain of losing his father when he needed him most. The pain of trying to find comfort in a warm body, only to feel worse once it was over.

Rhett has always been there for me, but watching him take a seat, I realize I've never truly been there for him.

"Morning," he says, looking like he didn't sleep at all either. "So, you and Logan?"

I can't look Rhett in the eyes as I let the words fall over my lips. "No. There's no Logan and me."

"Seriously, Mia. Are you going to let this come between you and Logan?"

I bury my face in my hands and fight to hold back the tears. "Connor used me. He made me think I meant something and when he was done, he threw me aside like yesterday's trash. He told every guy on the football team that I was easy. It took weeks before it stopped."

"Before what stopped?"

"I was easy so they felt they had all the right in the world to slap my ass, to make crude remarks of how they would fuck me."

When I hear the mug fall on the table, I get up to leave. I can't do this. It shredded me seeing Logan's reaction, but Rhett's will be the end of me.

I dart to the side, but Rhett's faster, locking me against his chest in a heartbeat. My legs give way from the ache eating at what's left of me. Rhett lifts me up and sits down with me on his lap, holding me as I fall apart.

I don't know if we sat like that for minutes or hours, but when I'm all cried out, all I can do is stare at nothing.

"I want yesterday back. I want to go back to when we were all living in North Carolina, and my biggest worry was not knowing how to kiss."

"I want that too," he whispers distraughtly.

“I want to go back to waking up on Sunday mornings, and smelling the bacon burning, as Dad tries to make us breakfast.”

Rhett starts to shake against me, and I know he’s crying.

“I want to go back to sneaking into your room in the middle of the night, because I knew you’d keep me safe from the monsters under my bed.”

“Mia,” he cries, burying his face in my hair. “I led the fucking monsters right to you.”

I hold him tightly, as he cries for not being able to protect me. I wait for him to calm a little before I go on, needing to get it all out in the open today.

“I was trying so hard to prove to myself I could make it without you, I could survive anything life threw at me, that I lost myself in the process. I can’t remember what used to make me happy before it all happened. I think that’s the hardest. Honestly, I think I dealt with Connor using me. Did it take a huge chunk out of my self-esteem? I won’t lie. It did, but I’ve worked hard to build myself back up. I’ll always be sad that I gave my virginity to an asshole, but I’m not traumatized. It’s just, I don’t know who I am, and that’s why I can’t decide what to do with the rest of my life.”

Rhett kisses my forehead and whispers, “I can’t change what happened, but will you let me show you what used to make you happy?”

I nod, feeling like I’m five again and my big brother is the only thing standing between me and the darkness.

“On one condition,” I whisper.

“Name it.”

“You’ll stop pretending around me. I see right through your bullshit act. You’re not happy, Rhett. I might be your little sister, but that doesn’t mean I can’t be there for you.”

He presses kiss to my forehead and whispers, “Fuck, you’ve grown up too fast.”



“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” Rhett asks, when we’re lying on the couch watching Twilight. He called Carter and told him he wouldn’t be going on that business trip. He then put on Twilight for us to watch. That’s the first thing he’s doing to remind me of what I used to love. It also reminds me

“I thought it didn’t matter anymore. It was in the past, and I wanted to leave it there like it was just another bad day. When I found out that it happened because of what you all did, it brought the memories back. I knew you wouldn’t understand why I was reacting like a bitch, because of the list, so I thought it would be better to tell you. I think it was a mistake to tell Logan, though.”

I can feel him looking at me, but I keep my eyes on the TV.

“Why? What did he do when you told him?”

“I told him I needed time, that the worst thing to happen to me was because of something the best thing to happen to me did. I just needed time, so I could separate the two. I know it doesn’t make any sense. Obviously, it didn’t make a lick of sense to him, because he said he’d never forgive himself and then he left.”

“If he feels half as bad as I do, then it’s going to take him some time to process what you told him,” Rhett says, as he starts to play with my hair. It’s another thing he always did when I crawled into bed with him. He used to play with my hair until I fell asleep. “From a guys’ point of view, he slept with the woman who’s responsible for what happened to you. That’s some fucked up shit to deal with.”

“I know,” I whisper, hating the thought that Logan had sex with Josie. “I think that’s what bothers me most. I personally know one of the girls he’s slept with. I keep picturing them together, and it’s awful.”

“You need to stop picturing them together. You’re going to drive yourself crazy. When the two of you get past this, then whoever he’s been with in the past doesn’t matter anymore. The only thing that will matter is the present and that he’s with you. Give the guy a chance. He loves you and honestly we could all see it a mile away. You’re meant to be together. I’m surprised you’ve held out this long. And I have to say, this is not a conversation I thought I’d ever have with my baby sister. I’m not cut out for this shit.”

I chuckle, poking him in the ribs. “You’re doing pretty fine.” Needing to change the subject I ask, “What happened to Evie? Did she move here with you guys?”

Rhett stiffens, and I look up at his face. There’s a frown, and he looks upset all over again. Seems I just found the source of his pain.

“I haven’t spoken to her in a while. Last time I heard, she was up in Chicago.”

“Why? What happened? The two of you were pretty close.”

“I fucked up,” he whispers, and I can hear the regret. “Her last words to me were, it doesn’t make sense that I sleep with women who don’t care about me, but the one woman who loves me, I won’t touch.”

“Ouch,” I whisper.

“I know you agree with her. Don’t hold back now.”

I shake my head, feeling sorry for him. “Let your little sister give you some solid advice. Give the girl a chance. She loves you and honestly, any idiot could see that you love her. You’re meant to be together, so go to her and beg her forgiveness for being such an idiot.”

Rhett chuckles and squeezes me. “Wiseass.”



Rhett ended up spending three days with me, instead of going on his business

trip.

I wake to the smell of burned bacon, and for a split-second, I'm confused, until I realize that I'm in Rhett's guest bedroom.

I quickly brush my teeth and rush through the rest of my morning routine. Dressing in a comfortable pair of slacks and baggy t-shirt, I walk to the kitchen.

Rhett's on a chair, busy disabling the fire alarm. I lean against the counter, thinking this moment is priceless. He's never been able to master the art of cooking.

He doesn't notice me until he's done making scrambled eggs.

"Hey, you're up," he says, smiling proudly at the pan filled with enough eggs to feed a small country. "I made breakfast."

"You did," I say, watching as he prepares two plates. "You made the bacon just the way I love it."

Our eyes meet for a moment, and when emotion threatens to overwhelm us, we take the plates to the living room. We sit on the floor and eat by the coffee table. It's always been like this for us, no frills.

"Remember when you tried to sneak out of the house?" I say, after swallowing a forkful of eggs.

"Which one?" Rhett chuckles.

Yeah, he used to sneak out a lot, so I clarify, "The night Dad pranked you."

He starts to nod as a huge smile spreads over his face. "Oh yeah. Shit, he got me good." I watch as one of his favorite childhood memories plays over his face. "He almost gave me a heart attack when he popped up from behind the drivers' seat. Did I tell you what happened afterwards?"

I shake my head. I only knew Dad hid in the car, waiting until Rhett got to the lake, before jumping out and scaring the living daylights out of him.

“Well, there I was, literally shaking in my boots while waiting for Dad to lay into me. Instead of telling me that I was grounded for life, you know what he did?” He doesn’t wait for me to answer, going on with the story. “He threw his arm around my shoulders and walked to the bonfire with me. If I wasn’t that scared, I would’ve laughed my ass off. The guys scrambled to hide the beer and cigarettes. Marcus actually swallowed his.” Rhett starts to laugh, as if he was there again. “He sat there in this huge cloud of smoke. Dad handed him a beer, telling him to put out the fire.”

Rhett’s laughter dies down, as a nostalgic look settles on his face.

“He sat there with us, as if he was one of the guys. He told us stories of all the times he got in trouble as a kid. You know, we didn’t even think of the beer. Not because Dad was there, but because we were having fun just chilling with him. On the way home, I asked him why he wasn’t angry that I snuck out. He told me he wasn’t happy that I tried to hide it from him, but that he understood that it was a part of growing up. He also said, he wasn’t happy that we’d somehow organized beer and cigarettes, and that he’d rather have us do it in front of him than behind his back. He wanted to show me that I could come to him with anything, that I could trust him.”

Rhett looks down at his half-eaten plate of food.

“He taught us the value of trust. It’s because of Dad that we turned out to be such a close group of friends.”

I blink as my eyes start to sting, and quickly take a sip of water.

“We had the best parents,” I whisper.

“Yeah,” Rhett says, reaching over the table for my hand. He squeezes it tightly. “And I have the best sister.”

I help Rhett clean up, then decide to go for a double pole dancing class. I’ve skipped the past few days, so I need the exercise. When I get to the studio, Beth’s not there, but Nancy assures me it’s okay if I use one of the

rooms. There aren't a lot of women here this early in day, and I find that I actually it much more than the hectic vibe at night.

For the first thirty minutes, I practice everything I've been taught, before I try out some new moves of my own. My mind drifts to Logan as my body keeps moving.

Am I going to give up on my dream of being with him?

"No, never," whispers my heart.

"Hell no, not after you tortured me for years fantasizing over him," grumbles my head.

Logan's not the type to suffer in silence for long, and I'm not one to hold grudges. It's just who we are. I'll give him a few more day, before talking to him. I'm sure we can move past the epic glitch that's Josie.

Speaking of the devil, as I take a break to drink some water, my phone beeps. It's an incoming message. When I see that it's from Mr. Peterson, I quickly open it.

Dear Mia,

Please accept my sincere apology for my daughter's behavior. She's always been a little unstable, but have never harmed anyone. What she did to you opened our eyes to how serious her problem truly is. She's been committed to Tranquil Paths. I've attached a copy of her admission to the clinic.

If there is anything I can do to make up for the pain my daughter has caused you, please do not hesitate to tell me.

Jeff Peterson.

I open the attachment and the first thing I notice is that she was admitted the day after I phoned her father. I feel better knowing he took my call seriously, and that she'll get help. Most importantly, I feel a sense of relief knowing that she's on the other side of the country and far away from me.

I'm unable to mourn the loss of my friendship, but maybe it's because there never were a friendship to begin with. It was all lies, and I can't be sad because the lies are gone.

Spending the last few days with Rhett has given me a new perspective in life.

Troubles don't cross your path so you have a reason to pity yourself, blame the world, and become bitter. Troubles are opportunities to learn, to grow stronger, and to move on to the next stage of your life.

Logan is the next stage of my life.



It's the beginning of a new week and also my first day at Indie Ink. Sitting in the car next to Rhett, I can't keep my leg from jumping up and down.

"Don't be nervous," Rhett says, as he turns into the parking area.

"Easy for you to say. What if the people don't like me? What if they think I only got the job because you're my brother?"

He parks his BMW in a reserved spot before turning to me. "First of all, you shouldn't care what people think. Secondly, you got the job because you own shares in Indie Ink. You don't need to work, but seeing as you have no idea what you want to do, I suggested the reception position. When you're ready to step up, we can all sit together and decide which department you'll be able to work with."

"What? Like run a department?"

"Yeah, don't you want to?"

"Hell no. I'm happy with being on reception. I don't want to be responsible for people."

"Then be on reception. My point is that you're one of the bosses, no one will fuck with you."

I scrunch my nose, not liking being called a boss. I'm so not leader material. I'm more of a nurturing soul and I'm not ashamed to admit it.

"Let's go," Rhett says, getting out of the car.

When we walk around the corner, I come to a sudden stop, but Rhett keeps on walking. I watch him take his place next to Carter, and it feels like I swallowed a watermelon. The guys are all lined up, just like they did my first year of high school and the night of my prom.

Already knowing the drill, I walk closer, thankful there's no one here to witness this emotional moment. I'm most likely going to end up ugly crying and ruining my make-up. It's not a pretty sight, but I won't give it up for the world.

I stop in front of Rhett and scowl up at him, but I can't keep the smile off my face for long.

"I'm proud of you, Mia," he says, and instantly I feel the sting of tears behind my eyes, but swallow them back, knowing there are four more guys waiting for their turn. "You're so much stronger than I will ever be. I'm lucky to have a little sister like you to look up to."

Oh shit, that's all it takes to set off the waterworks.

"Thanks for ruining my make up," I tease, as I press a kiss to his cheek and hug him. "You'll always be my hero," I whisper in his ear, so the others can't hear.

I let go and take a step over to Carter. The smooth move makes him smile.

"When you started your senior year, Dad sat me down and told me I should always look out for my sister. You were a daughter to him. I've done a shitty job of looking out for you, but I promise that if anyone ever fucks with you again, I'll obliterate them from this planet."

I press a kiss to Carter's cheek and hug him. "I love you, Carter." His

arms tighten around me, and only then I realize how much he needed to hear those words from me. We never were the kind to talk about our emotions. Actions were what matter most, and they still are.

I slide over to Marcus, and he immediately pulls me into a hug.

“I’m sorry, Mia.” His words sound like they carry the weight of the world.

I’m surprised by how emotional he is. Marcus has never been the emotional one in the group. He was actually the ruthless one, cold and callous.

“The few days I still have left on this planet, I’ll spend making it up to you.”

Shocked, I want to draw back and ask what he means, but he holds me tighter. “Only you know. I’ll talk to you later.”

I can’t bring myself to let him go. I hug him with every bit of strength I have, and whisper, “I love you. I love you. I love you. You’ll tell me later, and we’ll fix whatever’s wrong.”

He lets me go and walks away. It kills me to let him go. I have no idea what’s going on with him. Worry gnaws at my insides. I’ll go to his office during my lunch hour and find out what’s wrong.

I ignore the looks from the others, who must be wondering what’s going on as I step over to Jaxson.

When I look up, and I see the tears in his eyes, I know that he knows what’s wrong with Marcus. He hugs me and whispers, “I’m on top of it. I won’t let my best friend die without a fight.”

The words shudder through me. *Die?*

There must be a mistake. Yes, it’s just a huge mistake. I say it over and over, trying to convince myself that everything can be fixed. I nod into his shoulder to show him that I heard what he said.

“You’re going to kick ass today.”

I nod again and press a kiss to his cheek. “Love you, Jax.”

I take a deep breath and step over to Logan. When I’m in front of him, my hands start to tremble. I’ve been thinking a lot about what I’d say to him when I saw him again, and now that I’m here, my well-practiced words disappears like a fart in the wind.

“Let’s give them a moment,” I hear Rhett say.

I watch them get in the elevator and wait for the doors to close before I look up.

“How are you holding up?” he asks, his eyes searching my face.

“Besides being a crying mess because of you all, I’m actually doing okay. I spent the last few days with Rhett. I needed it and I think in a way he needed it, too.”

The corner of his mouth twitches, as if he was about to smile but just couldn’t.

I start to ramble, just wanting to get it all out. “I know you said I’d be better off with some lucky bastard, but I want you to be that lucky bastard. Rhett helped me make sense of the mess in my head, and I want you to know that I don’t blame you, or any of you, for what happened. I dealt with it. I was upset because I couldn’t remember what I used to like until I saw you. You made my heart skip a beat back then, and it was so good to feel it again. You made tingles race over my skin, and it felt amazing. I had a huge crush on you, and when I saw you, I realized that the crush had turned into love. I’ve never felt wanted and loved by man, until last week. When you hold me I feel loved. When you look at me like that, I feel wanted. I’m not giving up on us, Logan.”

I take a deep breath, hoping what I said made sense, or at least some of what I said.

Chapter 12

Logan

The past few days have been the hardest of my life. It feels like I've been put through a shredder. I wanted to go to Mia and beg her to give us a chance. But she asked for time, and I had to respect that.

"I spent hours trying to find out where Connor is," I say, and when I see the worry spark in her eyes, I quickly put her at ease. "I didn't find him which is probably a good thing. I realized that beating up a guy and landing my ass in jail for assault or murder, is not the way to win your heart. I realized that it's not about what I want or need. It's about what you need. And that got me thinking about what you want. You said you needed some time, and I was ready to hand you over to some other guy because I didn't think I could ever be worthy of you. I still don't think I'm worthy of you. I'll never be worthy of you, Mia. I'm glad I made you feel wanted and loved. I'm fucking honored that you love me. You're the most amazing person I know. You've been through hell, and you're handling it much better than I am."

I take a breath before I go on. I want to make her mine and erase the last three years. I've wasted too much time, time I could've spent holding and loving Mia.

"I've made so many mistakes, which I'll regret for the rest of my life, but the biggest one was not admitting that I love my best friend's sister. The first time you smiled at me, you owned me. I knew that when you'd finally love

someone, you'd love them unconditionally. I just never thought I'd be the lucky one. I was right though. You do love unconditionally. You'll climb a mountain for the one you love. You'll swim through an ocean for them. You love with so much passion it burns brighter than a thousand suns. Never in a million years did I think I'd be the one you love. I sure as hell hoped for it, but I didn't dare believe it could happen. I don't deserve your love, Mia."

Tears start to fall over her cheeks, and I can see that she's fighting the urge to drop her eyes to her feet as she chews on her bottom lip. I reach for her lip and rescue it from between her teeth.

"Meeting you was fate. Being your friend was a bonus. But loving you is a choice I made, because I can't imagine growing old without you. If you want me, I'll be honored to be the lucky bastard in your life. I love you. I've always loved you, and I will love you for the rest of my life."

She covers her face, before taking a step and burying herself against me. When I wrap my arms around her, I feel a slither of peace for the first time since the bomb was dropped.

I keep quiet, holding her until she wraps her arms around my waist. Only then do I whisper, "We both need time, so I think we should take it slow and just enjoy the fact that we're finally a couple. You okay with that?"

She nods and a huge smile spreads over her face, as she looks up at me. "So no kissing?"

I let out a chuckle. "I wouldn't say that slow. I was thinking more along the lines of not taking the first flight to Vegas, and eloping right now."

When I lean into her, she moves away from me with laughing bubbling over her lips. She puts her hands behind her back and shakes her head at me.

"I like the anticipation. I'll make you a bet, Mr. West. Whoever gives in first and kisses the other, owes the winner something."

"Okay, that's a deal." I can see she's trying to think of what the prize will

be. “The winner gets a marriage proposal.”

Her eyes widen with surprise. “I’m so not losing.”

I laugh as I throw my arm around her, pulling her close to my side.

“It only counts for kissing right?” I ask and in answer she bursts out laughing while we get into the elevator.

Chapter 13

Mia

I'm on my break and taking advantage of the hour to talk to Marcus.

I knock on his door and open it slightly, and see him standing by the huge windows, staring outside. Quietly, I push the door open and go in, making sure to shut it just as quietly behind me.

The thick carpet mutes my steps as go to stand next to him. For a while we say nothing as we stare at the beautiful view of New York buzzing with life below.

"I found out four months ago," he whispers. "When my father shot me, they removed the bullet, but apparently fragments were missed. I have lead poisoning and because it's so close to my heart, there's only a thirty percent chance that an operation might work. If they don't remove it, I'll die. If they do try to remove it, chances are good that I'll die."

My hand trembles as I lift it to my mouth in shock. This can't be happening. I've been wallowing in self-pity, while Marcus has a death sentence hanging over his head.

No, this can't be happening. Marcus is too young. He has his whole life still ahead of him.

I can't process the words. It feels as if I'm having an out of body experience, watching other people as they struggle to deal with the cruelty and finality of a life-threatening illness.

“Are they sure there’s only thirty percent chance? We can keep looking until we find a doctor who can help. Maybe they made a mistake. That’s possible, right? Doctors make mistakes all the time. Did you get a second opinion?”

Marcus turns to face me and I see the answer in his eyes before he says, “I’ve looked, Mia. The first month I found out, I was in denial, sure that they had to be wrong. Every doctor I’ve spoken to say the same thing. If it were caught earlier, my odds would’ve been better, but because I’m already dying, my heart won’t be strong enough to survive the operation.”

“There has to be something we can do, Marcus. You’re too young to die. You have your whole life ahead of you. This can’t be happening to you.”

He takes a deep breath and shakes his head. “I’m on a list for a heart transplant, but because I have O-negative blood type, it’s not the easiest thing to get a donor. Besides, I’m so far gone at this point taking a healthy heart would be a waste. Odds are good that my body might reject it.”

“No.” The word is loud, as if it’s being torn from me. “You have to keep fighting. You’re not dying, Marcus. You’re alive. We can find you a heart. We’ll find a way to make you stronger so you can survive the operation. You’re not dying.”

“Mia,” he whispers. “I know it’s not easy to hear. I am dying. Denying it won’t make it go away. I’ve accepted it. It is what it is.”

“It’s not fair!” I cry. “You’re only twenty-six.”

There’s a resigned look in his eyes, and that scares me most.

“Don’t give up, Marcus. You have so much to live for.” He pulls me into a hug, as I say the words over and over.

Marcus can’t die. I won’t let him die. Jax said he’s taking care of it. I’ll speak to Jax, and together we’ll find a heart for Marcus. We won’t give up.

“I love you with all my heart, Mia.”

I sputter the words back to him, wishing I could give him my heart.



After my pole dancing session which consisted mostly of me falling on my ass, I go to Marcus' place. I haven't been able to think of anything else since I left his office this afternoon. I can't go on as if he's not dying. If our time is limited, then I want to spend as much of it with him.

I knock on his door and wait a while before he opens. I'm shocked at what I see. He looks as if he hasn't slept in years.

"Marcus," I breathe, following him inside. His shoulders are hunched from death weighing on them.

I close the door and rush to his side. "Sit down. Is there anything I can get you?"

"I just took the meds. What are you doing here?" He leans back and only now do I notice all the weight he's lost. He catches me staring and laughs. "The suit is padded to hide the weight loss. I get them tailor made so the guys won't notice. I'm not ready to tell them." He lets out a bitter chuckle. "I wear make-up like a fucking girl."

I sink to my knees in front of him, placing my hands on his knees. I can feel how cold he is right through the material. I get up and go to his room, and when I see that the covers on the bed are messed up, I turn back to him. I take his hand and pull him up. Placing my arm around him, I help him to bed, and once he's lying down, I cover him up.

"Why are you still working? You should rest so you're strong for when we find a heart."

He closes his eyes as if he's in physical pain. "I'm not just going to lie here and waste away. I only told you because I owed you. I don't want your pity, Mia."

“You owed me?”

“The screw crew list. It’s true, Mia, what goes around comes around.”

“No, Marcus, don’t ever think that.” I whisper. I take his hand and hold it in both of mine. “I don’t blame you for what happened with Josie. That’s on her.” I take a deep breath. “I don’t pity you, Marcus. I care about you. I want to help you because we’re family.”

“Don’t feel bad, Mia. You were right. I fucked up. You wanna know what’s the worst?”

“What can possibly be worse?”

“Her name is Willow. She was roommates with Della and Evie. I don’t know if you met her. She’s ... she’s smart and stubborn. She’s a lot like you actually. I pushed her away, but all I want to do right now is hold her, and tell her how much I love her.”

I press a kiss to his hand wishing I could make things better for him.

“Why did you push her away?”

His eyes well with tears and I quickly wipe one away as it escapes.

“I’m fucking dying. Would you want to be with a rotting piece of flesh?”

His words are cruel and ruthless, breaking my heart.

“Don’t say that, and yes I would. If Logan were in your position, I’d want to spend every second with him. I have no guarantee that he’ll be here tomorrow. I learned that lesson when my parents were yanked out of my life.”

“I can’t do that to her. I love her too much.”

“Think about it, Marcus. She has a chance to love you, to feel your love, but you’re taking that away from her. If the worst happens, and you do die, she’ll be left with the thought that you never cared for her. I’d want to be left with the memories that I was loved and that even though he’s gone, his love will be with me forever and no one can take that away from me. Love her

while you can.”

He pulls my hand to his mouth and presses a kiss to the back of it. “When did you grow up to be such an amazing woman?”

I just shake my head at his compliment, but I bury it deep in my heart where I’ll treasure it.

“Can you do me a favor?” he asks. “Grab my phone.”

I reach over and pick it up then look at him.

“I don’t have the guts to tell her alone. Will you phone her and ask her to come over? Will you stay with me?”

“Of course.” I blink the tears away and scroll through his contacts until I find Willow. I press on her name and put it on speaker.

“Marcus?” She sounds surprised to hear from him.

“Willow, it’s Mia. I’m Rhett’s little sister and a friend of Marcus. He asked me to phone.”

“Is he okay?” she asks, now sounding on edge.

“Can you come over to his place so we can talk?”

“Now?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

I place the phone back on the stand. He starts to sit up, but I stop him, lightly pushing him back against the pillows.

“What are you doing? You should be resting.”

“I’m not letting her see me in bed,” he says, still being the prideful man I’ve always known.

“Marcus, don’t hide this side from her. If you’re going to let her in, you need to trust that she can handle both the good and the bad.”

“You’re right. I don’t like it one bit, but you’re right.” He slumps back down, his face pale.

“Are you in pain? Can I get you some water?”

“Water, please.”

I rush to the kitchen and fill a pitcher with water and some ice. Grabbing a glass, I rush back to Marcus. I pour him a glass and watch as he takes a few sips before helping him place the glass on the side table.

“I really think you should stop working, at least until you feel better. The guys need to know, too. Exhausting yourself like this to keep up pretenses is just plain stupid, Marcus. Take a break from work and rest. You’re going to need the strength for the fight ahead. Tell the guys, so they can support you.”

For a long moment, all he does is look at me. I can’t tell if he’s thinking about what I just said, or upset with my honesty.

“I don’t know how to tell Jax. How do I tell my best friend I’ll never get to be his best man? I won’t be there with cigars when his children are born.” The look of pain on his face is so intense it brings tears to my eyes.

He presses the palms of his hands hard against his eyes.

“It’s unimaginable, thinking ten years from now I won’t be a part of his life. How do I tell the most important person in my life, I’m dying?”

I swallow hard, widening my eyes to keep the tears back.

“You don’t tell him you’re dying, Marcus. Tell him you’re sick. You’re not gone yet. You still have time with him, with Willow, with all of us. Don’t spend that time thinking about what you’ll miss out on. Spend your time doing what you love, with those you love. You can still be a part of everyone’s life, even if you do leave us. Write your thoughts down for years from now. Write your best man speech. Write down what you’d want to say to Jax when his first child is born, and add the cigars to the envelope. You can still be here. Just because you might move on sooner than us, doesn’t mean you’re gone. You’ll never be gone from our lives or our hearts.”

I can see that my words are reaching him and if I’m not imagining it, I

think I can even see a spark of the old Marcus in his eyes.

“You should become a nurse, Mia. You have this way of showing compassion without making the sick feel like begging for death.”

I scrunch my nose. “You think?”

“Yeah, take it from me. You’d make a great nurse, or maybe work in hospice. Your honesty is raw and needed when facing a death sentence. You’ve helped me find perspective, and even a little hope. I’d be so fucking pissed at myself if I spend my last months, feeling sorry for myself.”

I’m just about to ask him if he has contacted hospice when there’s a knock at the door.

“I’ll get it. Do you want me to prepare her?”

“See, you’re amazing. Please, Mia,” he whispers. I can see how upset he is about the whole situation, and I lean over him to press a kiss to his forehead, like he’s done with me a hundred times.

I open the front door to a pretty blonde with the softest brown eyes.

“Hi, Willow. I’m Mia,” I say, standing to the side so she can come in. I close the door behind her and take a deep breath before I turn to face her.

“Hi, Mia. Is Marcus okay?” She looks so worried, and I hate that I don’t have good news to wipe her worry away.

“Willow, when you see him, you might be a little shocked. He’s very sick, and if you need a minute to prepare yourself, I’ll understand. He’s lost a lot of weight, and he’s exhausted, but he can’t wait to see you.”

Her mouth opens, but no words come out.

“He’s in his bedroom. Do you want to see him?”

She nods, still unable to form any words. I take her hand and hold it tightly as I lead her into his room.

When he sees her, tears escape his eyes. I fight the urge to run to him. I let go of Willow, as she slowly starts to walk towards him.

“Hey, babe,” he whispers. “Surprise.”

She sits down on the bed, her eyes flitting over every part of him that she can see, then she leans forward, and kisses him.

When she pulls back, she whispers, “You know I hate surprises.”

They both smile at her attempt to lighten the tension.

“I’m sorry I pushed you away,” he whispers, before a determined look settles on his face. “I have something to tell you but before I do, you need to know that I love you. I don’t want you to pity me.”

Her tears fall silently as Marcus tells her everything. His eyes are on their joined hands, and I can see the fear hiding behind them. He’s scared he’ll see pity on her face.

When he’s finished talking, Willow takes his face in her hands looks him right in the eye. “I’m here now. I love you and I’m not leaving your side, even if you become an ass again.”

“When I do become an ass, please remember that I love you. I fucking love you with every beat of my heart.”

I cover my mouth to smother the sob that rises at hearing his words. When Willow says that she’s staying the night, I let myself out.

When I check my phone I see that I have two missed calls from Logan. It’s already ten pm. I decide to take a chance, so instead of phoning Logan, I message Rhett.

Mia: I’m spending the night at Logan’s.

Rhett: Be safe and don’t make me an uncle. I’m too young.

Mia: LOL

Chapter 14

Logan

When there's a knock at the door, I frown. It's late and I'm not expecting anyone. I was just about to send Mia message, but throw my phone on the table before going to see who's here.

I open the door, and I'm surprised to see Mia.

"Hey, I tried to phone you. Is everything okay?"

She tries to smile bravely as she comes in, and for a second, I worry that she's here to tell me she's changed her mind about us.

"Can I spend the night?"

She wouldn't want to spend the night, if she was upset about us, right?

I tell myself to calm down and not to jump to conclusions.

"Yeah, of course." I lock everything. "Did you just come from the gym?"

I ask as I eye her bag.

"No, I went earlier."

She doesn't elaborate so I leave it. Taking her hand, I lead her to my bedroom.

"Just to be clear, the only rule is no kissing, right?" she asks, as she reaches for the hem of her shirt.

I quickly take hold of her hands, stopping her. I search her face, trying to figure out what's wrong.

"Talk to me."

Her eyes drift over my face as if she's seeing me for the first time.

"I got some really bad news today that I can't share with you, but it's made me realize that life is too short and I don't want to miss a second with you. I know we said we'd take it slow but slow is highly over rated. There's only this moment, and I want to spend it with you."

Fuck, she knows. "It's about Marcus, isn't it?"

"You know?" she asks surprised.

"I overheard Jax on the phone the other day. He's trying to get Marcus moved to the top of the donor list. He knows they won't budge, but it doesn't stop him from trying. He's also been in touch with a heart specialist in Europe. Apparently, the doctor takes on cases no one else is willing to touch."

"No luck with that yet?" she looks so hopeful, it hurts.

"Not yet, but we're not giving up. Jax is trying to get an appointment set up with him."

"Does everyone know?"

I shake my head. "I don't think so. We're waiting for Marcus to tell us. How did you find out?"

"He told me," she whispers.

I'm surprised. I never thought Marcus would open up to Mia first.

"It's really bad, Logan. He's dying, and I feel so helpless. I just came from his place. He's lost so much weight it's scary."

I frown at hearing that. He looked fine earlier.

She must read the confusion on my face, because she says, "He wears padded suits and covers the rest with make-up."

What the fuck? "Seriously?"

"Yeah, it's so unfair. Why Marcus?"

"I don't know, Sweetheart. I wish it wasn't him."

“Me too.”

I pull her into a hug and hold her for a while. Now I understand why she doesn't want to take things slow. No one knows when their time will be up. She's right, though. We only have this moment. We've already wasted years we could've been together.

“Let's get some rest,” I say, just wanting to hold her in my bed.

I pull my shirt off before reaching for hers. Taking hold of the hem, I slowly pull it up so I can savor the first time I get to undress her. When I crouch down to take off her shorts, I press a kiss to her stomach, taking a deep breath of her unique scent. She's wearing the same sexy outfit she had on when I saw her pole dancing, and it makes my heartbeat speed up.

I lead her to the bed and wait for her to climb under the covers, before I lie down next to her, taking her in my arms.

I'll be happy to hold her like this for the rest of my life. It's all I ever wanted.

Her fingers skim over my abs. “Which gym do you go to?”

“I don't,” I say, suppressing the urge to kiss her, only because I want to savor the anticipation a little while longer. I was serious when I said the second I kiss her I'm going to ask her to marry me. There's no one else for me.

“Then how do you stay in shape?” Her fingers keep trailing the lines of my abs, making it so much harder not to strip her bare and bury myself inside her.

“It's from running after you,” I chuckle.

She pushes me onto my back, her smile seductive as she whispers, “I better thank you then and just for future reference, I'm on the pill.”

I force myself to think of laws and court procedures, in an attempt to not lose control.

Her breaths are warm, as she lightly caresses her lips over each muscle. I pull her hair free from the band holding it, and watch as it falls over my skin. From this point of view, it looks like she's seconds away from giving me a blowjob, and the sight alone makes me groan.

Her eyes are heavy with lust and all I can think is that she's beautiful. She moves, bringing her leg over my hips, and then she straddles me, pressing her pussy down on my cock.

Fuuuuck. I almost come in my pants and there's clothes between us. I'm going to lose my load like a teenager the second I push inside her wet heat.

"You keep looking at me like that, and we're going to have a problem," I growl, knowing I'm seconds away from taking her.

"What kind of problem?" she purrs, she fucking purrs.

She sounds like carnal sex, and I'd gladly follow her through the gates of hell.

"The rock hard kind that's going to be reckless and hot," I say, thrusting my hips up so she can feel me.

She moans a deep, seductive sound that shatters the last of my control, and I can't stop myself from grinding my cock against her pussy.

Grabbing her hips, I throw her onto her back and leaning over her, I growl, "We're playing with fire."

She presses closer to me and whispers, "Then incinerate me."

That's all it takes for me to forget about taking it slow. She looks like every heavenly sin wrapped seductively in a bow of lust.

Her hands crawl up my chest, and when she reaches my jaw, she starts to pull me towards her. I can see it in her eyes, she's going to kiss me, and for a second, I contemplate letting her be the one to kiss me first. But then the caveman in me comes out, needing to be the one who kisses her so I can propose to her.

I move my head at the last minute and trail my lips over her jaw. When I reach her neck, I take small bites of her soft skin, wanting to leave my mark on every inch of her beautiful skin.

I skim over the tops of her breasts, not sure how far we should take this. If it were up to me, I would've been balls deep in her already. She might just want to fool around.

She lifts her hips, pressing hard against me and it makes me see stars. We both groan, and if she does that again, I'm not going to last. I grab hold of her hips with the intention of keeping her still, but that goes out the window when she starts to slowly grind herself against me.

"Logan," she whispers my name in the most amazing way, breathing faster as her movement speeds up.

This is a side of Mia I didn't even think could exist. Don't get me wrong. I like it. I like it a lot. Fuck, just when I think she can't be any more perfect, she surprises me.

Wanting to make her moan until she comes apart, I start trailing kisses down her neck, slowly working my way to the top of her breasts. I lick the swells of her breasts, until I reach her hard nipple. I suck it into my mouth, right through the material, which earns me one of those sweet moans.

She buries her hands in my hair, her back arching as she offers herself to me. I've dreamt about this night for so long, but not one of those fantasies has anything on the real thing.

Resting one arm next to her head, I stare down at her. Her fingers brush lightly up and down my arms, and I feel her love for me in every touch, see it in every look.

Wanting to make this moment last as long as possible, I slowly start to lean down. When I feel her breaths bursting over my lips, I stop, just taking it all in.

“Don’t move,” I whisper.

I move my hand down from her breasts, until I reach her panties. I drink in every breath as I cup her for the first time. Her lips part as she sucks in a breath of air, and I can almost taste her.

I keep my hand still over her, watching as the emotions play over her face. She’s perfect. She fits just right against my body, in my life, but mostly in my soul.

I close the last of the distance between us and my heart almost explodes when our lips touch. Her breath hitches and I feel her trembling. She knows what this kiss means. I don’t devour her the way I want to but pull back so I can see those eyes that brought me to my knees.

“You make me happier than I ever thought I could be. If you let me, I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to make you feel the same way. Marry me, Mia, so we can go to the movies and sit in the back row, making out like teenagers. So that we can spend our weekends sleeping in late, because we’ve spend the whole night making love. I choose you, and I’ll choose you over and over. Every single minute of my life I’ll choose you in a heartbeat, without any doubt. I choose you now, and I’ll choose you in fifty years. I promise to never regret choosing you, but to remind you every single day of why you’re the one. I promise to protect you, but above all, to protect us.”

Tears are trailing down the sides of her temples, disappearing into her hair. Her breaths are deep and slow over her parted lips as if she’s trying to breathe in every one of my words.

“I choose you, too,” she whispers, bringing her hands to my neck and pulling me down.

~

Our mouths crash into each other, sparking a scorching heat that’s strong

enough to burn a lifetime.

She tastes amazing as our tongues dance together. This kiss is much more intense than the first one we shared, because now I know she's mine.

Our tongues twist, and when I nip at her bottom lip, she takes a shuddering breath, just like the first time.

And just like the first time, I need more of her. I break the kiss and whisper, "I want you, Mia. I want you in every possible way."

"I want you too, Logan. Make love to me?"

I don't know what I did right to deserve her and I'll spend my life treasuring this gift she's giving me.

I undo the snap behind her back and slowly peel the material off, taking in the sight of her breasts. Not being able to prolong the moment, I take her left breast in my hand, in awe of how perfect she feels.

Needing to see all of her, I hook my fingers into her panties and drag them down her legs. When she's naked beneath me, lust takes a back seat to awe. She's everything ... She's my heaven. I shove my pants off, and kick it to the floor.

As I crawl back over her, her eyes dart down until they widen. Then she fucking licks her lips, as if she can't wait to take me in her mouth.

"Fuck, you're deadly in bed. But what a way to die."

I trail hot kisses over her breasts, softly biting and tasting her creamy skin. Placing one hand on her hip, it's overwhelming to feel her bare skin beneath my fingertips.

I lie down on top of her and watching her face, I press myself hard against her pussy.

She lets out a moan, and her breaths speed up. "Logan." Her voice is filled with need and it's a powerful thought, knowing she wants my cock inside of her just as badly as I want to be buried in her.

Her nails dig into my arms, and she pulls me down to her. Sliding my cock up and down her clit makes her body shudder underneath mine. I take her mouth hungrily, not being able to get enough of her taste. Her tongue starts a fast and hot assault on me. Every nerve ending in my body is alive because of this woman.

When I slip my hand between her legs and feel how wet and hot she is, I groan deep in my throat. I push a finger inside her, and her inner walls immediately try to suck me in further.

“I’ve wanted this for so long,” I groan.

I press the heel of my hand against her clit while slowly thrusting my finger into her tight pussy. Being this close to her does something to my heart. It’s as if she’s breaking it and putting it back together in a way only she’s able to. No one but her will be able to fill the cracks after this moment.

I rub my palm hard against her clit, as I thrust my finger deeper inside her. She gasps and her body tenses against me for a moment, before a moan escapes her lips.

Pushing my finger as deep as I can, I rub slow circles over her clit, giving her the friction she needs. She’s so damn tight. It’s going to feel amazing to be inside her. I know I won’t last very long.

I move slowly, watching every reaction to my touch play out over her face. She’s so damn responsive, it’s mesmerizing to watch.

She trails a hand down my abs, making a torturous path to my cock. Her delicate fingers wrap around my hard length, her thumb rubbing over the sensitive engorged head.

“Fuck, Mia. I’m not going to last long.” I bury my face in her hair. Every muscle in my body tightens, as I fight for control, so I don’t just slam into her to find my release.

She lifts her hips, and presses my cock against her clit, and keeps me

trapped with her hand. I close my eyes to take in the feel of her. I start to move, sliding my cock up and down her pussy until I'm covered in her arousal.

"That's ... Logan, keep doing that," she groans, as she grabs hold of my hip with her free hand, and presses my cock harder against her.

Needing to see her face as I make her orgasm for the first time, I push myself up, letting us touch only from our hips down. I watch my cock slide up and down, and the sight of the engorged head of my cock rubbing against her swollen clit, nearly does me in.

Her thighs squeeze against my sides, and I quickly bring my eyes to her face as she arches up, her lips parting as her breaths come faster.

"Logan," she moans long and hard as her body tenses beneath mine. Wanting to feel her orgasm more than anything, I cover her body with mine, and before I can think clearly, I position my cock at her entrance and push my way inside of her. I fight to keep my eyes open, as I only manage to enter her with the head of my cock. She's too fucking tight to enter in one long thrust. Her pussy greedily sucks at the head, taking me in another inch.

"Fuck," I groan and it feels as if my balls are trembling from the strain of not moving. "Fuck, Mia." The words are chocked out of me as she lifts her ass of the bed, taking me in another inch.

"Move! Please, move," she begs, her body quivering underneath mine.

Slowly, I push deeper into her, before pulling back. I keep the slow pace, working myself deeper and deeper with each thrust of my hips. I almost blow my load just from finally being all the way inside her pussy.

One more thrust is all it takes for her lips to part on a silent O, while she comes on my dick. Feeling her thighs trembling against my sides, and her pussy gripping my cock, is fucking amazing.

I take her nipple between my teeth, biting down on her soft flesh as I pull

out before slowly sinking balls deep again.

“I love you, Logan,” she whispers when she comes down from her orgasm.

Her cheeks are flushed, and the look on her face is so much more than love. It’s everything I feel for her, but what we don’t have words for. Now I understand why they call it making love.

Chapter 15

Mia

This night is perfect and everything I dreamt it would be, and more.

After the most amazing orgasm, he continues to devour my mouth, making my mind cloud over with need to feel him move inside of me.

“I love you, Mia,” he whispers, as he starts to slowly move. I’ll never hear those words enough.

I kiss him as hard as I can, needing to feel his tongue the same way he’s moving inside me. Logan slips his arms underneath my lower back, almost crushing my body to his. He rolls his hips into me, making mini orgasms ripple through my body. I feel every beautiful, hard inch of him inside of me. I never knew something so perfect existed, until this moment.

I can’t even moan to express how good it feels, as Logan shows me the meaning of ecstasy. The tingles in my abdomen keep building, until it’s an overwhelming need to explode.

I move my hands to his ass and dig my nails into him, wanting to feel his muscles moving with every thrust.

A low growl escapes his throat, and he pushes my body harder into the mattress as if he’s trying to make us one, as he slams his cock inside me.

He slides a hand underneath my butt, and his fingers sink into my flesh as he locks my hips to him. When he lunges into me, I feel him go deeper than before, and it makes my body start to quiver with pleasure.

He keeps moving faster, every powerful push of his hips driving his cock deeper inside of me, in the most incredible way. Shivers start at my toes, moving through my body like a Mexican wave. It feels as if all of me is going to burst, as I'm overwhelmed with one wave of pure rapture after the other.

Everything stops, my heart, my breathing, my mind ... everything, until there's that perfect silence again. It's so perfect, it touches my soul in a way I've never been touched before.

When I come back to earth, and the last ripple of euphoria ebbs away, I feel Logan shudder, as he's overcome with the same pleasure I just felt.

I watch as the same silence washes over him and it's the most beautiful sight I've ever seen as he empties himself inside me.

I let the tears of happiness fall. Logan West loves me. I reach up and trace my fingers down the side of his face. This wonderful, amazing, beautiful man chose me to be his.

He is mine. Knowing I'll be the only one to feel him like this for the rest of his life, conquers my very being.

This is where I end, and we begin.



I wake up to Logan's hand caressing my breast. He kisses my neck, as he moves his body, until he covers me with all of him.

"I can get used to seeing you naked in my bed every morning."

"That would be nice," I say, placing my arms around his neck.

I don't think I'll ever get enough of seeing his eyes look at me with such wonder. I slide my hands down his muscled chest, loving the feel of him. I'm still getting used to the idea that I can touch him whenever I want. The memory of what we did last night overwhelms me.

I smile up at him. "You're my fiancé." It sounds both foreign and right at

the same time.

“Soon you’ll be my wife.” His words melt my heart.

He places a tender kiss to my lips.

“Thank you, Logan. You’ve showed me that dreams do come true,” I whisper against his lips.

“I’ll do everything in my power to make you still believe that dreams come true on our fiftieth anniversary, Mia.”

He crushes his mouth to mine, in a hungry kiss, that makes my insides wake with desire. I love everything about Logan. I love the way he kisses me, showing me that I’m the only one he’s thinking of. The way he makes love to me, shows me that I’m the only one he’s ever made love to.

I let one hand travel down his body, until my fingers wrap tightly around his cock. He groans as he starts to thrust against my hand, just like he did the night before.

Glancing up at him, all I see is desire, his lips slightly parted while his eyes hold mine.

“I’m going to come if you keep stroking me like that,” he groans. It sends shivers racing over my body, from the pure pleasure of being able to make him groan like that.

He sits back, and taking hold of my hips, he tugs me down until his cock rests between my legs.

“Put your hands above your head. Just lie like that so I can watch you,” he growls.

Wow, it’s the first time he’s being all alpha with me, and it’s a huge turn on.

I stretch my arms above my head, and it makes my breasts thrust into the air.

“Fucking perfect,” he growls as his hand caresses a hot path from my

neck, down between my breasts and over my stomach, until he reaches between my legs, pushing a finger inside me. His palm presses against my clit and it draws a deep moan from me. He moves his hand unbearably slow. My hips start to move, needing more friction.

“Keep still,” he demands, making my body flush hot with need.

This is a side of him, I haven’t seen before. It’s a huge turn on, one I can easily get used to.

He pushes his finger against the side of my walls and it instantly makes my body tense with a wave of pleasure rippling through me.

My lips open so I can beg him to do that again, but I can’t form the words. A smile pulls at the corner of his mouth in that sexy way that turns me mush. He knows what he’s doing to me, because he starts to slowly rub the same spot, until my knuckles turn white from clinging to the covers so I won’t move.

My back bows off the bed as the tension builds, then everything splinters into oblivion. There’s no way I can keep still as I have the most powerful orgasm ever.

“That was fucking beautiful,” he whispers breathlessly.

I wrap my legs around him, not wanting this to end just yet. Feeling him position his cock at my opening makes small spasms of pleasure ripple through me. Just like the night before, he pushes slowly inside of me, savoring every second. He leans over me, keeping himself braced with his arms on each side of my head. I let my legs fall open, so that our bodies are only touching where we’re joined.

He starts to move slowly, going as deep as he can, before pulling out. His eyes never leave mine as he makes love to me.

I start to move, meeting every one of his thrusts with my hips tilted up, until all you can hear is the slapping of skin and our racing breaths.

When we find our release, it's just as beautiful as the night before.

Chapter 16

Logan

Needing to talk with Jaxson, I walk into his office and wait for him to finish the call he's busy with.

"Please, anything you can do for us will be appreciated," he says. "I know you have to follow rules, but we'll build a new wing for the hospital, if that's what it takes."

When he's done, he leans back in his chair and wipes his hands roughly over his face.

"It's fucking killing me. I don't know who else to phone. I swear I'm at the point where I'm willing to buy a fucking heart on the black market."

There's nothing I can say that will make this easier for any of us.

"He called Carter. He's taking a sick day. Mia was with him last night. Jax, it's worse than we thought. She says he's really bad. I was thinking we should go talk to him. It's time he knows that we know."

My brother instantly breaks down. I've only seen him cry once and it was at Dad's funeral. We were seven.

I rush around his desk and pull him up. Jax is the strong one. He took on every bully for me. It's unbearable to see him like this. I hold my brother as he cries for his best friend. I don't think there's a person on this planet who loves Marcus more than Jax does.

I give him time to compose himself before I let go.

“I can’t lose him, Logan.” His voice is raw with pain.

I wish I could promise him that we’ll find a way to save Marcus, but I can’t do that to him. False hope will only hurt him more.

“Let’s go see him,” I say. When we walk out of the office, we run into Della. “Jax is puking his guts out. I’m taking him home. Will you keep an eye on the office?”

“Sure. Make sure he gets lots of fluids,” she says, giving Jax a concerned look. “I hope you feel better soon.”

“Thanks,” he rasps.

I manage to get him out of the office, without drawing any more attention to us. We take my car, because I don’t think he’s in any condition to drive.

When we get to Marcus’ apartment, I’m surprised when Willow opens the door. She looks like she hasn’t slept.

“Hey, guys,” she whispers. “He’s been sleeping a lot.”

“I just need to see him,” Jax says. “I won’t wake him.”

She nods, letting us in. I follow Jax to the bedroom, but stand back, as he goes to the side of the bed. He looks down at Marcus. Jax takes deep breaths, but it doesn’t help. His body starts to jerk with silent sobs, as he takes in the fragile state Marcus has somehow managed to hide from us.

“Dude, you better not be crying,” Marcus says, without opening his eyes.

“Fuck you,” Jax rasps.

At first, Marcus must think that Jax is joking until he opens his eyes.

“Fuck you, Marcus Reed. How dare you fucking hide this from me? How dare you fucking give up?”

I watch as the meager strength leaves Marcus. I didn’t realize how much it took out of him to pretend he was fine.

Jax sits down on the bed, and it’s painful to watch his strong arms wrap around Marcus’ frail frame.

He starts to rock Marcus, whispering, “I’m going to find you a heart. I promise you, I’ll find you a heart.”

Marcus shakes his head, too emotional to say anything.

“I won’t give up. There’s no way I’m going to your funeral. I’m not going to be that fucked up friend who has a beer on Fridays with a fucking grave.”

I press my palms to my eyes, fighting to not break down.

I leave the room so I can compose myself.

“How are you holding up?” I ask Willow, where she’s standing by the window.

“The man I love is dying,” she whispers hauntingly.

I go stand next to her and place my hand on her back, trying to give her some sort of comfort.

“I’ve been talking to Leigh. Her father is huge in the medicine industry. I’m hoping Mr. Baxter can somehow help.”

I know there was a time we all thought Jax and Leigh would end up together. I’m not sure what went wrong between them, but I’m thankful that she’s willing to try and help Marcus.



After everything that’s happened the last few weeks, I think we all need a breather. I’ve called all the guys up to my office. Marcus has been doing a little better since Willow moved in with him. It’s as if he has more fight, maybe because he now has a reason to live.

As they all come in, they give me a weird look. They must be wondering who the man is that’s sitting at my desk.

“Thanks for coming guys, this is Mr. Specter,” I introduce everyone to him, as well.

“Take a seat.” When they’re all sitting, I smile. “I’ve asked Mia to marry me.”

“Fuck,” Rhett says, and he’s the first to get up. He hugs me tightly, and I think he’s trying to see if he can crack a rib in the process. “You’re going to be my fucking brother. I couldn’t have chosen a better man for my sister.”

“Aww ... Fuck,” Marcus mumbles, wiping tears away from under his eyes. “You’re all turning me into a pussy.”

I walk to him, so he doesn’t have to get up. I know Carter and Rhett suspect something, but Marcus hasn’t told them yet.

I shake Marcus’ hand and say, “You better be at my wedding.”

He just nods, and I avoid the questioning looks from Carter and Rhett.

Carter shakes my hand as well. “It’s about time the two of you make it official.”

Jax gets up, and he looks away for a second before he says, “You deserve this, Logan.” I shake my head, and he repeats, “You fucking deserve, Mia. You’re worthy of her love. If anyone deserves to find happiness with Mia, it’s you.”

I nod, knowing that he’ll keep saying it until I agree.

“I have two favors to ask of you all,” I say, clearing my throat. “I need you to help me pick a ring that’s perfect for my fiancé.” I smile as they holler. “I also want all of you standing up front when she comes walking down that aisle. Well, besides Rhett.”

He scowls at me, and I let him suffer for a second.

“You’ll be walking her down that aisle so you can give her away.”

“Fuck, this is emotional,” Marcus says with a hoarse voice. “I think my balls just retracted and I’m growing a pussy.”

We all laugh, and I’m in awe of Marcus being able to still joke and make us laugh.

Minutes later, the laughter is gone. The moment Mr. Specter lays out the rings he brought with, they all start to argue over which ring I should take. This is what I wanted for them. I look to the hidden camera and wink. If we can't save Marcus, then I'll get as many memories of him on camera as possible.



"I really like this ring," Carter says, twirling the small circle of platinum between his fingers. He looks up at me, and the smile says it all. "This is her ring."

I nod, knowing he means Della. "It was made for her."

"For who?" Rhett asks, catching the end of the conversation.

Carter holds out the ring to him. "What do you think? Is it Della?"

"Are you serious or yanking my chain? Usually, I can tell."

"I'm serious," Carter laughs. "It's time I make an honest woman out of her."

"You got that right," Rhett jokes.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Marcus talking with Mr. Specter.

Hell, even Rhett and Jax are looking at rings, and they aren't in relationships. I get a feeling that soon the screw crew will be renamed, devoted dudes. I'll leave the renaming to Marcus, though. It's clear I suck at it.

I finally decide on a ring and ask Mr. Specter to add an engraving to it for me.

Now I just need to plan the perfect way to give Mia my ring.

Chapter 17

Mia

Logan and I have decided it's better if I just move in with him. I've been spending most of my time at his place but making sure that I visit Marcus at least once a week.

I've taken the late flight to North Carolina. Logan will join me tomorrow, to help me pack everything.

The guys will never sell the house, it holds too many good memories, but I want my mother's things in my home.

I smile as I get into a cab. I'm excited to see the house again, and I'm looking forward to spending the weekend here with Logan. This is where I fell in love with him.

When the cab pulls up to the house, I quickly pay, then grab my bag and get out. As the cab drives off, I stare at the house where I met Logan, Jaxson, Marcus, and Carter. I stare at my family home and feel an overwhelming sense of comfort, knowing I can call such great men my family.

When I unlock the door, I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with the familiar scent that always filled the house. I place my bag by the door and take the stairs up to the bedrooms.

I'm so deep in thought that I almost have a heart attack when Logan says, "Hey, did you have a bad day?"

My heart skips a beat, just like the last day he asked me that question. I

was only expecting to see him tomorrow, but I have to admit, this is a nice surprise. He must've taken an earlier flight, having planned to surprise me all along.

"It's nothing. Did you all skip class again?" I repeat my question from the day we first kissed, not being able to keep the huge smile from my face.

I'm so lucky that I have him. The fact that he wants to role play the day he taught me how to kiss, just emphasizes how much he truly loves me.

"No, it was canceled. There's a game tonight." Logan tilts his head, and his eyes search my face, just like the day he first kissed me. Now I know when he looks at me like that he sees the real me. "Want to talk about it?"

As I walk into my room, Logan follows me inside. He takes a seat on my bed, which brings back the intense emotions I felt for him as a teenager, in love with a boy. I missed seeing him like this, in this house.

"Talk to me, Mia. I might be able to help, and worse case I can listen."

I laugh out loud, enjoying this so much. How did I ever get so lucky to find a man that's willing to recreate one of the most amazing days of my life?

"I haven't kissed anyone yet and today all my friends were talking about their first kisses. It felt like ..." I let the words trail away, feeling a little sad for the teenager I used to be.

"It felt like?" Logan stands up and walks to where I am. When I don't answer him, he gently places a finger under my chin and lifts my face, so I have to look at him.

"It felt like ..." I swallow hard, feeling overwhelmed. "I used to think I was fat and ugly." I shake my head. "But when I looked in your eyes, I never saw myself that way. You never saw me that way. I always saw how beautiful I was in your eyes."

I can see that my words throw him.

"You're not fat and you sure as hell aren't ugly, Mia." He falls right back

into the moment.

“What if I meet a guy who wants to kiss me and I mess it up?”

“Is that what’s really bothering you?”

“Yeah, I don’t want to look like an idiot.”

“Do you want to learn how to kiss?”

“It’s not like I can go for lessons somewhere,” I whisper, knowing what’s next.

“I can show you.”

“Would you be okay with that?”

He drops his hands from my neck and smiles. It’s different this time, as if he’s nervous.

“Of course I’m okay with it,” he whispers. “This is the part where my heart was beating out of my chest. I couldn’t believe you’d let me show you how to kiss.”

He takes a step closer to me and places a hand on the back of my neck, making butterflies erupt in my stomach. That’s all it takes, just one touch.

“If you worry too much about it, you’ll end up missing out on the whole experience.”

I smile, now knowing what he meant by that.

Tilting his head to the right, he leans closer until I can feel his breath on my lips. My heart starts to beat faster, as I wait for him to kiss me.

Slowly he closes the distance until his lips almost touch mine. “Mia Daniels, will you do me the honor of becoming Mrs. Mia West?”

He drops to his knee and everything stops. The loud thumping in my ears, the quivering inside of me, and even the shaking of my hands. There’s only the perfect silence surrounding us, as I stare at the man at my feet.

He takes a ring from his pocket and holds it up to me, and I can’t hold the happy tears back.

“Logan West, I’d be honored to take your name.”

He slips the ring on my finger and immediately crushes me in a hug. He brushes his lips against mine, as he takes a step that presses his body right up against me. His tongue traces my bottom lip again and I part my lips, giving him access to my mouth. He caresses my tongue, before softly biting my bottom lip. I take a shuddering breath in response to the incredible feelings always engulfing every part of me, when Logan kisses me.

He brings his other hand to my jaw and with his body, he pushes me back, until I’m up against the wall. This time he doesn’t stop.

Chapter 18

Logan

My hands go to her shorts, and I quickly remove them, along with her panties. She takes off her shirt, giving me access to her bra, while she makes quick work of removing my shirt. We work together to get my pants off of me.

When we're both naked, I slip my hands around her and grab hold of her ass. I lift her against me, and she quickly locks her legs around my waist. I pull her ass cheeks apart as I thrust into her.

"Logan," she cries, her nails digging into my shoulders. I don't let up, but keep thrusting deep inside of her, and just by her reaction alone, I know I'm hitting her sweet spot. "Shit. Shit. Shit," she starts to chant.

She wraps her arms tightly around me, squashing her breasts against my chest and I almost come. I squeeze her ass, my finger digging into her soft flesh, and it makes her feel unbearably tight around my cock.

"Fuck," I hiss as I come, unable to hold out any longer. I grind my pelvis against her clit, letting the ecstasy wash over me.

Her breathing hitches and she tenses against me. The orgasm hits her so hard, she doesn't even shudder. The only way I know she's coming, is from her inner muscles clamping around my cock. It feels so good being inside of her. Even though we've both found our release, I don't stop, keeping my pace slow.

A few minutes later, I can feel myself growing hard again, which is a new record. I've never recovered this quickly before.

She brings her hands to my neck and kisses me. No, she devours me as if she'll drown without my breaths racing into her.

I turn around and move us to the bed. I sit down with her straddling me, and when she starts to ride me, I move one hand to her hair. I grab a fistful and hang on, as she slams down on my cock. She pulls back and I see the moment she goes from innocent girl to wild woman. Every time she slams down, her breasts bounce against my chest. Fuck this is erotic.

I bring both hands to her breasts and squeeze them hard. She grabs hold of my shoulders and digs her nails into my skin, so she can move faster on me.

When I can see she's fighting for her release, I move my hands to her hips. I keep her down and force her to grind down on me.

"Ah." The word explodes from her, and I quickly twist around, so she's on her back. Driving my cock inside her hot pussy, I take her fast and hard, until she arches her entire body, from her shoulders to her ass.

When I feel her coming, I place my left thigh on the bed, right under hers and I open her wide. Holding onto her hips, I take her as hard as I can, until the orgasm rocks my world and I fall over her.

I'm drained. I can't move.

"I think you broke me," I groan, which only makes her laugh.

I slide to her side and just lie still, staring at her.

She brings her left hand up and stares at the ring, before taking it off to have a closer look at it. The second she sees the inscription the smile fades from her face and her eyes begin to shine.

"I choose you," I say the words.

She puts the ring back on and then proceeds to kiss the life out of me. "I

choose you,” she whispers, as she starts to give me hickeys all over my chest. “I always wanted to do this to you and now that you have no energy to fend me off, I’m going to mark every inch of you.”

I lie back and close my eyes, as her hair brushes over the skin she’s just marked.



We’re planning the wedding, not wanting to wait too long, just in case we can’t find a heart for Marcus.

We’re having our rehearsal dinner tonight, and I never thought I’d be excited about it.

We’ll all meet at the church to rehearse everything we need to know for the ceremony. Afterwards, we’re all heading to the nice Italian place just down the road. It has an intimate feel, and the food is great.

When we stop outside the church, both Mia and I can’t keep the huge smiles off our faces. I take her hand, and as we walk inside the church, I think about how the next time we’re here, she’ll become my wife.

We greet Pastor Bowen, and when everyone is here, he talks us through the whole process.

Mia and Rhett walk to the back of the church, and I watch as he throws an arm around her shoulders, ruffling her hair.

“Rhett!” she shrieks, and it makes us all laugh.

Jax is standing next to me, followed by Marcus and Carter.

I smile at Pastor Bowen as he leans closer, and whispers, “Wait until she walks up the aisle on your wedding day. You won’t be smiling then. You’ll be crying like a baby.”

I let out a burst of nervous laughter, which makes the rest of the guys laugh. “Can we come?” Rhett hollers from down the aisle, and it makes us

laugh louder.

“Just don’t yell like that on the wedding day,” Pastor Bowen yells back.

“Marcus!” Jax shouts, and it changes the entire atmosphere in the building from happy to panic.

Jax catches Marcus as he goes down. Carter stands shocked as Mia and Rhett run up the aisle. Mia grabs her bag and gets her phone out, hopefully to calling 911.

There are moments Marcus comes to, and during those moments, he doesn’t take his eyes off Jax. “I’ve got you. I’ve got you.” It’s all Jax says over and over.

“I’ve got you.”



We’re all sitting in the waiting room.

“Jax,” Carter waits for him to look up from where he’s sitting, his head hanging heavy in his hands. “Are you going to tell us what’s going on?”

Jax shakes his head, gets up, and stalks out of the waiting room.

Mia gets up, grabbing Carter’s arm when he wants to go after him. “Let him go. I’ll tell you.”

“You know?” Carter sits back down as she nods.

Mia sits down next to me and I take her hand, ready to jump in if she can’t tell them.

She looks up at the ceiling and swallows hard.

“When they removed the bullet from his chest, they missed some fragments.”

She takes a deep breath and seeing how hard it is for her, I take over.

“He has lead poisoning. They caught it too late. The fragments have embedded themselves in his heart, and it’s causing infection on top of the

poisoning. He's too weak to survive them going in to remove the fragments."

I clear my throat. Saying it out loud like that is devastating.

"Marcus is dying," Mia whispers. She gets up, unable to sit still. "We've been trying to get him moved up the donor list. He had a good chance of surviving a heart transplant, but that was last month. Marcus is dying," she says as she breaks down.

"There has to be something we can do," Carter says the same word we've all said at some point.

I shake my head.

"What have you tried?" Rhett asks. He gets up and starts to pace. "Have you checked with every single doctor?"

"Jax has spoken to anyone who would listen."

"Did you try buying a fucking heart in Mexico," he snaps.

"Jax is busy with that right now," I say calmly, as if we're not talking about breaking the law.

"Why didn't anyone tell me?" Carter asks. When he stands up, I get up as well. The tension is thick in the air. "Why the fuck didn't you tell me?" He looks right at me.

"It wasn't my place."

"Wasn't your place?" he repeats my words. "He's our fucking brother! It was exactly your place. How the fuck do you think my father survived all those heart attacks? Did you for one moment stop to think that I might know a fucking doctor who could help Marcus?"

Shit, I didn't.

"Right," Carter snaps, as he stalks out already dialing someone's number.

"I didn't think," I whisper to myself.

Rhett places his hand on my shoulder. "He's upset. Don't let it get to you. I would've done the same thing."

I can just nod as Mia pulls me into her arms.

Chapter 19

Mia

We're still waiting for someone to come tell us what's going on. I'm sitting between Logan and Jaxson, holding both their hands.

Willow comes rushing in with another woman, and I feel Jaxson stiffen next to me.

"Where's Carter," the other girl asks.

"Hey," Carter says, taking hold of her arm. I didn't even see him come in. "I spoke to Dr. Barnard. Thanks for giving me Dr. Bokeria's number. They're going to have a live conference now. I'll let you know how it goes."

He leaves again, and we're back to waiting. Jaxson gets up and follows Carter out of the room. I hope he can find something out.

Hours later, Jaxson and Carter walk back into the room. They both look like they've been to war. Worry lines make them look years older.

Jaxson looks at Logan and me. "Marcus wants to see you. He's down the hall, room 413."

Shit, it's bad. I don't know if I can walk in there and say goodbye.

Logan pulls me up and placing his arm around me, we walk down the hall. It feels long and empty, as if we're walking on the shards of broken hearts and lost dreams.

The second we walk into the room, my eyes search for Marcus. I pull free from Logan and rush to the side of the bed, taking in all the tubes and sounds

coming from the monitors.

“Thanks for coming,” Marcus whispers. It looks like the bed is trying to swallow him whole. “I want to ask you a huge favor.”

“Anything,” we both say at the same time.

“I know you wanted a wedding in a church. I really want to be there before I die. Will you get married here, in this room?”

I’m already nodding, before he’s even finished talking. I’d do anything for Marcus.

“I’ll call Pastor Bowen and tell the guys,” Logan says, leaving me alone with Marcus.

I want to hug him, but I’m scared I’ll hurt him. It’s terrifying how fragile he looks. The poison is eating away at him right in front of our eyes. I don’t think there’s a word for how it feels, watching such a beautiful, vibrant man being reduced to a shell of his former self.

“Come here,” he whispers, weakly reaching for me with one arm.

I sit down on the side of the bed and hug him as best as I can.

“I don’t want you to go,” I sob. “I thought if I hoped hard enough you’d get better. I can’t say goodbye to you.”

“Then don’t,” he whispers. “Just because this body will die, it doesn’t mean I’m gone, Mia. It’s just a body. I’ll move on to wherever it is we go after this life, and I’ll drive whoever’s there crazy until you all join me.”

“Do you think you’ll hear me if I talk to you?”

“I hope so. I really hope so.”

~

I look at my reflection in the mirror. Willow and Leigh helped me to get ready.

Della comes into the restroom with Jamie and Danny right behind her.

She hugs me and gives a proud smile.

“You look stunning, Mia.”

She greets Willow and Leigh, and as I smooth the dress out over my middle, Danny says, “You look like a real princess.”

The awe on her face is the biggest compliment I’ve ever been given.

When we’re all ready, the girls leave to go and join the guys. When I step out of the restroom, Rhett’s waiting for me. He pushes himself away from where he was leaning against the wall and his eyes start at my feet, until he reaches my face.

“I wish Mom and Dad could see you right now. The woman you’ve become would make them so proud.”

I start to wave my hand in front of my face. “You’re gonna make me cry.”

He takes my hand and clears his throat.

“I never thought about this day. I never thought a day would come where I’ll have to give you away to another man. Some part of me still thought Dad would be the one to do that. I tried to think what Dad would’ve said to you if he was standing here right now.”

He presses a kiss to my forehead, and when he pulls back, he says, “You’ll always be my little sister. I’ll always do my best to fight any monsters you might have. But I promise you, Mia, when you have cravings in the middle of the night because you’re pregnant, I won’t answer the phone. That’s Logan’s job.”

I start to laugh, and it makes him smile.

“But I’ll be available to babysit my nieces and nephews any time.”

“Uncle Ledge,” Danny calls from down the hallway. “Why are you talking so long? My legs are tired from waiting. Uncle Logie started biting his nails. Daddy says if you don’t get your behind in here now, that he’s

coming to fetch you.”

“Well, you heard her. Let’s get this show on the road.”

As I hook my arm through Rhett’s, I take deep breaths, letting him walk me down the hall. When we walk into the room, I’m surprised at all the flowers, and that the guys made an effort to make it look pretty. Marcus is leaning heavily against all the pillows they propped behind his back, so he can sit upright.

“Who gives this woman away,” Pastor Bowen gets right to it.

I start to blink like crazy when Rhett says, “I do.” He takes my hand and places it in Logan’s.

When I look into Logan’s eyes, everything fades. I only hear his words, and I only see the love he feels for me.

We exchange rings I didn’t even know we had, when we say our vows.

Pastor Bowen says, “I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. West.”

Cheers sound up in the room and Danny starts to dance, but my eyes go to Marcus, and I lose all control I had. He’s smiling while tears fall down his cheeks. “Thank you,” he whispers, and I’m so glad we could give him this.

EPILOGUE

Logan

After the setback Marcus had, he's been doing a little better. I know we shouldn't get our hopes up, that it's only the calm before the storm.

My wife is going to kill me though. She doesn't think I know about the pole dancing competition she's taking part in today. We're all going to be there, front and center to support her.

When everyone is ready to leave, we take three cars. We find parking and get to our seats just as it starts.

When the first contestant is up on stage, Rhett leans over to me and whispers, "I can't believe you let my baby sister do pole dancing. I give her to you, and within the first few months you've corrupted her."

I laugh, but still manage to get the words out. "This is all Mia. I had no say. She's been doing it for almost a year now. Wait until you see her."

Watching all the performances, I have to admit they're all good.

When they announce that Mia is up next, I sit up straight.

The lighting fades away, until we can't see anything on stage. I take out my phone and press record, wanting to capture this moment for her. Piano notes open the song, and a blue hue grows brighter, until we can see her.

I lose my breath as she starts to move. She's gotten so much better. Damn, that's my wife up there.

There's so much emotion in everything she does. I've never heard the

song before, but it fits her perfectly. The first half I watch my wife, before I slowly turn my phone, wanting to capture the guys' faces. I start with Carter, who's frozen on the spot, his eyes taking in every move she makes. Jaxson has a huge smile on his face, which makes me smile.

At the same time, I focus the camera on Marcus and Rhett. The emotion on their faces is priceless. I'm so glad I get to capture it for her. I turn the camera on me and wink at her, before focusing it on her again.

When the song fades away, she ends her performance by sliding to the floor and lying still.

For a second the guys are still stunned, then Marcus struggles into a standing position, and he starts to clap. Mia's head snaps up and when she sees Marcus, she gets to her knees and covers her mouth.

The entire audience is silent as Marcus says, "You were poetry in motion. With every beat of my heart, thank you for amazing me one last time."

She leans forward and cries into the floor, but then she darts up faster than I ever could, and she leaps from the stage. She races up the stairs as Marcus makes his way down the aisle, using the chairs to hold him up. The last two people get up and move out of the way, just in time for Mia to throw her arms around him.

~

Mia

We never did anything huge for Christmas, but this year is different. No one is saying it out loud, but it's our last Christmas with Marcus.

I've been helping Willow get everything right for today. I'm up early and softly crawl out of bed, so I don't wake Logan.

I pull on a pair of slacks, a t-shirt, and my winter jacket, before sneaking

out of the room. When I get outside, I'm not surprised to see Marcus sitting on the deck, with a blanket over him. He's watching the sunrise.

"I never used to do things like this," he whispers.

I walk over to him and pull a chair up right next to his. I sit down and take his hand in mine, leaning my head on his shoulder.

"It's beautiful," I whisper.

The sky is a breathtaking array of colors.

"I need to ask you something."

I look up at him. "Anything."

"Promise you'll make sure Jax doesn't spend his Friday's drinking beer at my grave."

I want to laugh and cry all at once but swallow the emotion down. "I promise."

"I want you to keep contact with Willow. When she meets someone new, I want you to give her this letter."

I take the envelope from him and see the words '*a new life*' written on it.

"The day of her wedding, I want you to give this one to the man she's marrying."

'To the man who holds my heart.'

I've never cried so much in my entire life like I've cried this past year. I now understand why our bodies are made up of so much water.

"The day she gives birth to her first child, give her this one."

'Willow.'

"These are for Jaxson."

I take them, unable to read the words as tears blur my sight.

"This one is for you."

Surprised, I take the envelope from him. I blink rapidly so I can see what it says, but there's nothing written on the envelope.

“Open it when you’re expecting your first child.”

I give him a weak smile, feeling too emotional. “Thank you for my letter. I promise I’ll make sure they get theirs. I’ll keep them all safe.”

He looks away, over the horizon, and I get up to go put the letters in a safe place.



We only had one rule this Christmas, no presents of monetary value.

We’re all sitting in the living room, and it’s weird to see no presents under the tree.

Carter stands up first. They had a private Christmas with Jamie and Danny the night before. You can’t not give a child presents.

“Do you people have any idea how hard it is to give a present with no monetary value?”

“It must suck for you,” Rhett says dryly.

We all start to laugh, and it warms my heart. This is what I wanted.

“Okay, but when your ears start bleeding, just remember it’s your own fault.”

I’m so surprised when he pulls a guitar from behind the couch, that my mouth just drops open. Danny comes tripling in and together they sit down on the couch that faces Marcus.

Carter starts to strum the cords. “You’ve got a friend in me.” He sings the kiddies song from a Disney movie, and when Danny joins in, my heart turns to a pile of mush.

We all clap hands when the last note dies away and little Miss Danny is quick to take a bow.

Up next is Rhett. He scowls at all of us. “Not a snowflakes’ chance in hell that I’m singing.” We all go ‘aww’ at the same time.

“But!” he says, holding up a finger. “I actually managed to think of something, and that alone should be counted as a present.”

“Yeah, we know you don’t like to think,” Della’s quick to say.

Again we burst out laughing.

“Roses are red, violets are blue, I love you guys, I hope you love me, too.”

We all just stare at him, until he starts to laugh. “I’m just shitting with you.”

“Uncle Ledge!” Danny gasps. “You said the S word.”

He looks instantly chagrined. “Aww, shit, sorry, princess.” When he realized he just said it again, he covers his face. “Dammit.”

When Carter finally catches his breath from laughing, he says, “Your gift is teaching my kid how to curse?”

“You know me,” he says, shrugging his shoulders. “When you’re all done laughing, I actually have something that doesn’t include me cursing.”

We all get comfortable again and Rhett looks at me.

“I never got to dance with you at your wedding, so I was hoping you’ll dance with me today.”

“That’s perfect,” Marcus says, a huge smile on his face.

The opening notes to ‘Dance with my father’ fill the room, as Rhett holds his hand out to me.

I take his hand with a trembling lip and bite it to keep from crying. He pulls me into his arms and holds me close as he starts to dance.

Rhett could never dance, he flat out refused to, but right now he’s dancing with me.

Suddenly, Rhett stops, and he holds his hand out to Marcus. He helps him up, and hands me over to Marcus, to dance the rest of the song with.

I don’t take my eyes off Marcus, trying to imprint the color of blue, the

love they hold, and the huge soul behind them, into my mind forever.

When the song ends, I say, “I love you with every beat of my heart.” I stand on my toes and press a kiss to his forehead, before I help him back to the chair.

Jax gets up, and for a second, he just stares at the floor. “That’s hard to follow up on. I’d dance with you, dude, but I don’t think it will have quite the same effect,” he jokes with Marcus.

“This is something I thought long about. What’s the one thing you’ll regret? I know you still blame yourself for what happened to Mia.” Instantly, the fun atmosphere evaporates, and my eyes dart between Jax and Marcus. “I took the list, and I went to see every single name on that page. Well, everyone but Josie.”

Jax hands Marcus a piece of paper, and I hold my breath until Marcus starts to laugh. “A petition? You got them to sign a petition for me to get over my guilt trip?”

“Yeah, I figured you needed it. Like an intervention on paper.”

Marcus nods, actually looking happy and I let out the breath I’ve been holding. “I needed this. I really did. Thanks, Jax.”

“You’re welcome.” He leans over Marcus and presses a kiss to the side of his head. “Love you.”

Marcus just nods, not able to say anything.

I jump up. “My turn,” I sing as I dance over the floor.

“Oh yes, where’s the pole?” Jax jokes, and I wink at him before I retrieve the envelopes from behind the TV.

“I’m giving you all vouchers. Marcus has taught me the value of time. So each of you gets a voucher for a day, in which my time will be yours to spend any way you want to.”

“I know how Logan will be spending his,” Marcus quips, as I start to

hand out the envelopes and it makes the last of the tension fade away.

When Logan gets up, he walks over to the TV and switches it on. He hooks a camera up to the TV, presses play, then comes to sit next to me again. I relax into his side as he places his arm around my shoulders.

We're all shocked as memories of us plays out on the screen. Logan asking the guys to help him pick a ring for me. Marcus and Willow sleeping. Rhett snoring. At that one we all laugh. Then there's Danny telling Rhett and me to hurry for the wedding, and the actual wedding itself. Even my pole dance is on it.

We spend the next hour watching how happy we make each other, and I pray next Christmas will be exactly the same.

~

Logan

No one knows that I recorded today as well. I'll keep it for next Christmas, so we can watch it then.

Mia crawls onto the bed and places a kiss to my thigh. She slips her fingers under my boxers and pulls them down my legs.

"What are you doing, Sweetheart?" I whisper, as I reach for her hair.

"I'm giving you your Christmas present," she says as she wraps her fingers around my cock. She strokes me lightly, and it sends tingles of pleasure racing over my skin. Damn, that feels good.

She leans a bit forward, and her hair falls over me. I brush her hair away, taking hold of it so I can see her.

She licks the head, before taking me in her mouth, making my hips lift off the bed. She starts to suck, while twirling her tongue around me, and I have to fight to keep my eyes open.

Seeing her suck my cock is a fantasy come true. She pulls back and licks me from base to tip, instantly making pre-cum form on the tip, which she quickly laps up.

Sliding her mouth over me again, she starts to suck harder while stroking the base. Feeling her head move beneath my hands, while watching her lips glide over me as she sucks me hard, is heaven.

My breaths come faster over my parted lips and my insides clench with pleasure.

“Wait. Wait,” I groan, not wanting to come yet.

I pull her up my body, so she’s straddling me. Taking hold of my cock, I start to rub her clit until her hips rub against me, her pussy begging for more.

Her cheeks flush with pleasure as she moans. I drink in her soft features, her lips parting on her moans, her nipples hard little pebbles, and her hips thrusting down on me.

“Logan,” she groans.

I keep teasing her pussy, as I rub my cock over her opening. I position the head of my cock at her opening and thrust up, filling her completely.

I take hold of her hips, so I can keep the pace slow and deep. I make love to my wife until she comes apart in my hands.

After I find my own release, she slumps over me and neither of us moves for a long time.

“I’ve decided what to do with my life,” she whispers.

“Oh yeah,” I say, pressing a kiss against her hair.

“Yeah, a great man once told me I should do what I want, that I should choose something for me, because it’s what I want. Another great man told me that I’m amazing with people. I’m taking their advice and I’ve decided to become a Hospice Care Nurse. I want to be there for people who are going through the same thing as Marcus. I think I’ll be able to help them.”

I close my eyes and wrap my arms tightly around her.

“I think you’ll be great at it. I’ll support you any way I can.”

She smiles up at me and presses a kiss over my heart before resting her ear against my skin.

“I love listening to your heart beat. I like to think it’s the rhythm of our love.”

The End

Find out what happens in Jaxson and Leigh’s story [Careless](#) ~ coming in February 2018

Read on for an excerpt from the first book in Michelle’s exciting Enemies to Lovers series: HEARTLESS, Book 1

Prologue

Della

Life is made up of a series of lies.

Love? It’s a fairytale some person made up so they didn’t have to face the cold, hard fact that we are all alone. You come into this world alone and you leave it alone. Loneliness, it’s the one the thing we fear most. It means you’re forgotten, you’ve been rejected, or you’re overlooked.

Little girls are told fairy tales of how a prince will come along to sweep them up into their loving arms. From a young age, they are taught that their purpose is to belong. They have to have a family, a husband, children – without this, they are failures.

Little boys are told stories of firemen, policemen, the brave souls who will overcome any evil. They are taught that their purpose is to be the man of the house, to protect, to provide – if they're not able to do this, they aren't men.

They're all lies that most people believe. We create such unnecessary pain for ourselves. You feel like a failure because no one *loves* you. You only exist if there's someone who sees you. Your life only has worth if you're living for someone else.

That restlessness you feel? It's your soul crying out to be set free from all the deceit you've been forced to believe.

Once in a while, someone will break free from the norm society has created. I want to be one of those people. I want to be *different*. I want to break every damn rule society has ever made for us.

It will mean that I'm alive and not just another sheep wandering aimlessly through life.

Chapter 1

DELLA

“Don’t look now, but they just walked in,” the red head whispers excitedly as I start to clear the table.

Rameses, the bar slash diner where I’ve worked since my first year of college, is always crawling with students.

I place the empty plates on top of each other as her blonde friend looks over her shoulder.

“Fuck, he’s so hot. I’d give anything to be screwed by Rhett.”

At first, I used to get embarrassed when I heard people talk like that, but after being at college for almost three years, there’s very little that shocks me now.

There’s not much in the way of dating where I’m from. Hell, I had to go to Polk County High School because Saluda only has an elementary school. Besides the random adventurer traveling through and the summer wave of tourists, the meager population of around seven hundred didn’t cater much for dating material.

I glance in the direction of the door and watch as a group of guys walk in. I don’t know them that well. I’ve heard rumors about them, that they’re known as the Screw Crew. Every girl wants to be screwed by them and every guy wants to be one of them. It’s really stupid.

They take a seat in my section, and the one with black hair grins at the blonde sitting at the table I’m busy clearing. He bites his bottom lip and

winks at her. Damn, even I have to admit that's hot. I might not date but just like any warm-blooded girl, I appreciate a hot guy when I see one.

The blonde shrieks excitedly and jumps up. "By tomorrow, my name will be on Rhett's screwed list."

The red head throws some money on the table and follows her friend over to where the guys are. The blonde slides onto the guy's lap, immediately kissing him as if there's no tomorrow. The university should have *making out* as a sport. I swear half the students would qualify for the Olympics.

People don't behave like that back home. Sue, the owner of the Mom 'n Pop diner I used to work at, would be chasing them out the door. After Mom passed Sue took us in. It's because of Sue that I'm able to study for my degree in Graphic Design. Without her generosity, Jamie and I would've been living on the streets. I had been working at her diner for about three months when Mom passed away after her long struggle with cancer. Sue let me borrow money so I could lay Mom to rest. She also took us in. She's old and hard as nails, but she's also the only one who cared about us.

I was ten when Dad died. It was an accident that took him from us. He was out hiking when he tripped over a root and plunged down Big Bradley Falls. After Dad passed, things got bad. Mom was pregnant with Jamie and had to take all kinds of odd jobs to keep the pot going. I was sixteen when Mom passed. Poor Jamie was only six and didn't understand the finality of death. For months she asked where Mom was and when she would come back. Even though we lost our parents early in life, things weren't all bad. Being poor didn't matter as much. I've never been scared of doing an honest day's job. I just want more for Jamie. I want to give her the world and that won't happen as long as we're stuck in that town. Even though Saluda is only three and a half hours away, it feels like I might as well be from another planet. The people back at Saluda are set in their ways. That's not me. I crave

more from life than the monotonous existence that small town has to offer. I want to experience everything life has to offer. I want to be independent. I want to travel. I want to live.

I place the glasses on the tray before taking the dirty dishes back to the kitchen. I studied my backside off to earn this free ride at UNC. The tips I make just about cover the rent. It's not like I need much, anyway. I'm here to study so I can get my degree.

Only six months left and I'll be finished. Then I'll be able to find a good job. I'll go back to Saluda to get Jamie and we'll leave that town for good. That's my three step plan. I don't have time for anything else, let alone fooling around. Not that I'm Miss America with a line of guys going around the block, waiting to date her. Hell no, the opposite sex hardly notices me, which is perfectly fine by me. Besides, guys are all horny idiots. I've heard one of my roommates, Willow, once say, "*Dicks rule, brains drool.*"

I share an apartment with three hot girls, like sizzling off the charts hot. Leigh, Willow, and Evie just have to pout and the guys are all puddles of drool at their feet. They make it easy for me to go by unnoticed, which is a blessing. I might share an apartment with the girls, but we hardly know each other. I'm too busy to hang out with any of them. Come to think of it, sometimes an entire week will pass by without me seeing Willow or Leigh. Evie is the only one I see every other day.

I walk back out and head over to the table the guys are seated at, noticing that more people have joined them. As I get to the table, I spot Evie. She's glaring at the blonde that's busy devouring one of the guy's faces.

"Are you ready to order?" I ask in general.

Evie tears her eyes away from the couple. When she spots me, a pretty smile pulls at her lips. I wish I had her hair. Because of the natural curl in her ginger hair, she can just wash and go, leaving to air dry. I, on the other hand,

have to blow dry my thick brown hair, or it will look like something made a nest in it.

“Hey, sweets. Get me my usual, please,” she says. I quickly write down her order of six chicken nuggets. She’s addicted to the chicken nuggets we serve here.

“You know her?” One of the guys asks Evie while looking at me. He’s got dirty blonde hair with a five-o-clock shadow dusted over a strong jaw. He looks like he could be trouble.

“Yeah, Della’s one of my roomies.” She points at the two blonde guys she’s sitting between and starts to introduce the guys to me. “These two are Jaxson and Marcus.” Then she tips her chin at another guy that’s busy on his phone. “That’s Logan. Jaxson and Logan are twins.” She wags her eyebrows playfully. “Double the trouble.”

Seeing as they’re friends of Evie, I smile at them. It doesn’t really matter that she’s introducing me to her friends, it’s not like I’ll remember them tomorrow.

She glares at the black haired guy again. “That’s Rhett,” she practically spits his name out.

Hell, something must’ve gone bad between them.

Rhett shoves the blonde from his lap and licks his lips as his dark brown eyes wander over the length of me.

“Why haven’t we met you before?” he asks. “I’ve been at the apartment quite a few times but I’ve never seen you there. Trust me, I would remember a face like yours.”

I ignore his flirting and answer, “I’m either studying or here at work. I hardly see my roommates.”

“I bet you taste sweet,” he says, winking at me.

Now I see why Evie doesn’t like him. I can’t blame her at all. I scowl

down at him before looking over the table again.

“Anyone want something from the kitchen? We’re closing in twenty.”

“I’d take one of you,” Rhett tries again.

“You’re wasting your time,” Evie snaps, irritated.

When he looks at Evie the smile drops from his face. Seconds tick by in silence before he looks back at me. “Are you a carpet muncher?”

“A what?” I frown at him, not in the mood for games. I’m tired and I still have an assignment I need to finish before I can even think of sleeping.

“Are you into pussies?”

What a jerk.

Probably thinks he’s God’s gift to women.

I take a deep breath so I don’t give him a piece of my mind. I need this job more than I need the satisfaction of telling him to go to hell.

“I’ll have a Dr Pepper, a cheeseburger, and fries,” Jaxson suddenly says. It sets off the others and I quickly write down all the orders. I give Jaxson a grateful smile before taking the order to the kitchen.

When I’m done handing the order over to the kitchen, I head out front to clear more tables. While I’m busy clearing the table next to the one Evie and her friends are seated at, Marcus says, “I bet you a hundred you can’t get her to spread her legs.”

“I’m a master at getting girls to spread them wide for me. Spreader bars should’ve been named after me,” Rhett jokes, while he pulls the blonde closer to his side. “Isn’t that right, babe?”

She nods all dreamily actually falling for his shit.

I shake my head, figuring Rhett already has that hundred in his pocket. The blonde will hump his leg right here if he says the word.

I go get their orders and as I place Rhett’s plate in front of him, he takes hold of my wrist. He tries to pull me closer, but I resist, yanking my hand free

from his.

“Come on, babe. You’re so damn cold. I’m sure I can find a way to warm you up.”

Ignore him, Della. He’s just an arrogant jerk.

Ignoring my own warning, I place my hands on the table and lean forward until I’m right in his face. I smile sweetly and bite my bottom lip, just like he did earlier. I watch with satisfaction as his eyes lock on my lips.

“Oh, baby,” I groan seductively. A cocky smirk pulls around his lips. He’s arrogant enough to actually believe that he stands a chance with me. What an idiot. “You think just because you’re hot every girl wants to be with you. The day I let you touch me is the day hell freezes over. There’s no way I’m letting your rotten, STD infested dick near me. ”

I blow him a kiss and walk away, feeling pleased with myself for putting him in his place.

“Make that two hundred dollars. Like I said, there’s no way she’s spreading it for you,” Marcus says as he starts to laugh.

The words register and I stop dead in my tracks. Slowly, I turn around as my blood starts to boil. I only realize my mistake when a huge smile spreads over Rhett’s face. I just fell for their stupid game. The bet is about me.

“Double that,” Rhett says as he locks eyes with me. “Four hundred dollars.”

Marcus and some of the other guys at the table laugh again. “You’re on. Damn, I’m going to enjoy taking your money.”

“How stupid are you?” I ask all the guys in general. I seriously doubt they have any kind of brain activity between all of them. “You’re making a bet in front of me. Do you really think I’m going to let any of you idiots near me?” I’m angry and offended that they would make a bet about who can screw me first, let alone do it in front of me.

Rhett gets up and walks over to me. I glare at him, wishing I could castrate him with just a look.

He lifts his hand to my face and I slap it away. “You’re seriously a piece of work,” I snap, wanting to do him some bodily harm.

“What’s going on here?” a deep voice interrupts my thoughts of punching Rhett right in the face.

My eyes dart to the owner of the voice and for a moment, I forget to scowl. I’ve seen him with the group a couple of times, but never up close before. Damn, he’s hot. The other guys pale in comparison to him. He’s much taller than the others, with dark brown hair that’s begging to have my fingers tangled in the thick strands. Our eyes lock and I almost forget to breathe. His eyes are dark pools that would make any girl forget her own name. His jaw’s covered with a few days’ old stubble, and it only makes him so much more attractive. His shirt’s tightly wrapped over a muscled chest. I’d love to find out if it feels as hard as it looks.

Suddenly, Rhett says, “Carter, you’re just in time. We have a bet going. Four hundred dollars to whoever gets her to spread them first.” The jerk points at me with a thumb. I have a sudden urge to grab it and twist it right off his hand.

For some reason, the stupid bet really bothers me now that Carter is here.

To make things worse three more guys walk in and come to stand at the table.

“You guys want in?” Marcus adds oil to the fire.

“In on what?” one of them asks.

“Betting pool. Whoever screws her first, wins.”

My eyes drift over all the faces around me. Evie mouths ‘sorry’ to me. Jaxson and Logan are too busy eating to pay attention. Marcus winks at me and it makes my anger flare back to life.

Before this really gets out of hand, I turn around and walk back into the kitchen. I wait until they leave before I go back out to clear the remainder of my tables. I've worked at Rameses for almost three years. You would think I'd be used to dealing with idiots like the Screw Crew.



The walk home feels much longer tonight. I should've taken my truck. It's old and leaves a huge ball of smoke whenever I pull away, but at least it still runs.

When I get home, the apartment's empty. That's what I like most about sharing with the other girls. When I'm here, I always have the apartment to myself. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to go out with them, to have close friends I can laugh and chill with. But then I remind myself that I'm not here to make friends. I'm here for Jamie. My sister is all that matters. A month after I finish here, Jamie will be eleven. I need to find a good job and get us a place of our own before she's twelve.

I throw my bag on the single bed. I don't have much in my room, just the second-hand bed and nightstand. I first shower, then make myself some coffee before settling down on my bed. I need to finish the assignment I'm working on even if it takes all night. Luckily it's Sunday tomorrow and I only have to be at work at twelve, which means I can sleep in.

I get lost in my work until I'm finally happy with it. Grabbing the cup with some cold coffee still left in it, I walk to the kitchen. I'm busy rinsing the cup when I hear the door open. I dry my hands and go to see which of the girls are home. When I see Carter coming in with his arm around Evie, I feel a slight sting of disappointment. I brush the unwelcome feeling away.

"... fucking bitch," he finishes whatever he was busy saying as his eyes land on me.

Damn, those eyes of his have the power to turn my mind to slush.

Then Evie looks up and my lips part with shock when I see her swollen cheek. Mascara is streaked over her cheeks, with red blotches around her eyes. I rush forward and grab Evie away from him.

“Get your hands off her,” I hiss.

Was he busy cursing Evie as they came in?

I bring her to the couch and let her sit down. I lift her face up, and with worried eyes, I take in the bruise on her cheek. Her tears make my insides quiver with anger. Evie is one of the nicest people I know. Why would he hurt her?

I turn back to Carter, my body shaking with rage. “Get out!”

He takes a step towards me and it makes me tense. I’m nothing like my friends. I won’t hesitate to introduce my knee to his balls.

“Let me-” he starts to talk, but I cut him off. He can keep his explanation for those air-headed bimbos he likes to screw.

“Nothing you say will make this okay. You’re nothing but a spineless piece of shit. Is it a turn-on?” I sneer as I walk towards him. “Does it make you feel like a man?”

“Della,” Evie calls from behind me. I need to get back to her. I shove him as hard as I can, and I’m pleased when he takes a step back.

He tilts his head and there’s an expression on his face I can’t read. Maybe anger? Who cares anyway? I hate the Screw Crew. They’re nothing but a bunch of bullies. I hope they aren’t close friends of Evie. She needs to stay away from guys like them. They’re nothing but trouble.

I didn’t see it earlier, but the brand of shirt he’s wearing is of the expensive kind. He reeks of money. That explains it all.

“You should use some of that money and buy yourself some morals,” I snap.

To my surprise he laughs, shaking his head at me. His eyes drop to my legs and it's only then I remember that I'm only wearing a shirt.

~

Carter

White cotton panties. Fuck. She yanks the shirt down and scowls at me.

“Careful, babe. Looking at me like that will get you in trouble,” I taunt her just because it's so fucking easy to get her all riled up.

Earlier at the diner, I actually thought she was hot. I admired her for standing up to the guys. I don't have to like her to admit that she's got killer legs, and don't even get me started on her mouth. I'd love to see her on her knees with her lips wrapped around my cock. Then I'll live up to the what she thinks of me as I add her name to the screwed list. She's just another judgemental bitch. I regret standing up for her to my friends, telling them to back off and to drop the bet. I'm going to win that bet just so I can see the look on her face when she realizes that she's nothing but a four hundred dollar fuck.

I watch as her scowl turns to a death glare, but I don't miss the blush creeping over her cheeks. What do you know? Little Miss high and mighty may hate me, but those blushing cheeks are a clear sign that she's attracted to me. That will work perfectly to my advantage.

I grin at her and whisper, “Game on.”

She takes another step closer to me and I get a whiff of her scent. She smells edible, like crushed apples.

There's a slight frown on her forehead when she says, “I have no idea what you're talking about, and I'm not one of your friends.” She wiggles a finger between us. “Whatever you think is going on here, it's not. Get out of

our apartment before I call the cops. “

“You’re quick to judge others, aren’t you?” I say as I start to plan all the different ways I’m going to have fun with her. “You’re one of those who loves to sit on your high fucking pedestal, while passing judgment on anyone who’s different from you. Quite fucked up if you ask me.”

“I didn’t ask you,” she snaps, her blue eyes sparking with anger. It makes them look electric.

“No, you didn’t,” I whisper. “A word of advice, next time make sure of your facts before you jump to conclusions. It will save you from having to crawl back to me with your tail between your legs to apologize. Then again, I’d love to see you on your knees.”

I see the moment doubt washes over her face. She’s finally second-guessing her actions. That makes me smirk as I lean into her. I watch her eyes widen and the blush deepens on her cheeks.

“Just remember I didn’t start this little game, you did.” I lean in more until our cheeks brush, and whisper in her ear, “But I’m sure as hell going to finish it, babe.”

She pulls away, her breaths coming fast. “I didn’t start anything, and I’m not playing some pathetic game.”

She still doesn’t understand what she did. “Sweetheart, you were so fucking quick to label me as just some asshole who has too much money and not a lick of decency. Who am I to disappoint you? I’ll just have to live up to the image you have of me. I wouldn’t want to let a clever little thing like you down.”

She glances back at Evie who’s been watching us with huge eyes. Before Della can look back at me I turn around and leave. I’m not going to make it easy for her to apologize. She’s going to learn the hard way that I don’t let people fuck with me and get away with it.

I'm not sure whether I'm pissed off at her for accusing me being some fucked up rich kid who would hit Evie, or whether I'm turned-on by her killer body. I've never felt so confused over a woman before. Why the fuck do I even care what she thinks? It's clear she doesn't think much of me.

I was helping Evie. She and Rhett got into an argument when that psycho blonde that was hanging around Rhett attacked her. I told Rhett to fucking man up and admit that he cares about Evie. I also told him to get rid of the trash. I swear he's fucking everything in sight so he doesn't have to face the fact that he's fallen for Evie. He keeps denying it but loses his shit whenever another guy just looks at her.

I don't understand why they don't just get together. A blind man can see that they have the hots for each other.

After the psycho blonde slapped Evie, I brought her home to make sure she was okay. I did it because she's a decent person and didn't deserve what happened. I also did it because Rhett is one of my best friends and I know he's going to feel like shit about what happened.

But mostly I did it in the hopes of seeing Della again. Earlier at the diner, there was tension between us and I was curious to see if it was real. When I'd first walked into the apartment, the tension was there in full force, until she saw Evie's face.

I had every intention of making sure the guys forgot about the damn bet until she got on her judgmental high horse. I've been judged wrongly before and it never bothered me. Marcus and Rhett are the ones with the screw lists. They're the manwhores responsible for our nickname, Screw Crew. I'm no saint but I have nothing on those two. As for the twins, Jaxson and Logan, they're not huge on dating. Jaxson keeps busy between college and being a personal trainer, where Logan is the quiet one in the group.

As for me, all my focus is on finishing my degree. Once I've graduated,

I'll start working at Indie Ink Publishers. Dad said I have to start at the bottom. I understand why. That's the best way for me to learn everything about the company and the people working there. When I take over from Dad, I want it to be because I deserve it.

On the drive back to the house I share with the guys, my mind goes back to the little spitfire. Even dressed in just a shirt and panties, she handled me like a boss. I have to admire her for standing up for Evie. But fuck, I'll never hurt a woman.

I'm sure as hell going to have some fun with Della.

Chapter 2

Della

“You’ve got it all wrong,” Evie says. “Carter only brought me home. He’s not the one that hit me. Carter will never hurt me.”

Oh shit!

What the hell have I done?

I swing back to the door, and when I see that Carter has already left, an awful feeling settles in the pit of my stomach.

“That blonde bitch slapped me because I got into to a fight with Rhett,” she explains. “I really don’t understand why he likes those types of girls.”

I close the door and walk to the kitchen. I open the fridge and look for something cold. There’s not much so I grab a bottle of water. I wrap a dishcloth around it as I walk back to the living room.

I press it lightly to Evie’s cheek. “Just hold it there. It will help with the swelling.”

I sit down next to her and sigh. I drop my head back and let out another miserable sigh.

“I accused Carter of hitting you,” I whisper. “Dammit, I’m going to have to apologize.”

Evie gives my hand a squeeze. “Thank you for looking out for me.”

I worry my bottom lip with my teeth. When I make eye contact with Evie, there’s only pity.

“Damn, I’ve screwed up badly, haven’t I?”

She nods, dropping the water bottle to her lap.

“Carter’s not the kind of guy you insult and get away with it. He’s the heartless one in the group.”

“Heartless?” I ask. “He made sure you got home safe.”

“Only because I have this love-hate thing going with Rhett. Those four guys are Carter’s family. He’ll do anything for them. I’ve known him for three years and he still keeps me at a safe distance.”

“So you’re telling me not to apologize? I’m not afraid of admitting when I’m wrong.”

Evie turns her body towards mine and looks me right in the eye.

“You’re only going to waste your time and make things worse. There was this girl who cheated on Jaxson. Carter got her to strip down to her underwear, thinking they were going to have sex. He made her do the walk of shame out of their house in her underwear. Carter doesn’t forgive he gets even. It would be better if you just ignore it all. It’s not like you see him a lot anyway.”

I take the bottle of water from her and open it. I take a few sips, thinking about what she just said. I didn’t take him for the cruel kind. Maybe Evie’s right? It’s not like I see him often. Besides, it’s only a few more months before I have my degree. We’re from different worlds. Once we leave here, I’ll never see Carter again.

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I ask, “Why do you hang out with them? They look like trouble.”

She looks deep in thought when she says, “They’re not trouble, Della. They’re my family. Few people know this, but I had nothing. I was one meal away from starving and living on the street when Rhett found me.” She looks around the apartment. “All of this is because of them. They are paying for my studies, for everything I need.”

Shock ripples through me. Never in a million years would I have guessed that Evie once lived on the streets.

“What do they want in return?” I ask. No one does anything unless they stand to gain something in return.

She shakes her head. “Nothing. At first, I thought there was a catch. I mean, people just aren’t that good, you know? But they have never asked for anything, Della. That’s why I love them. They are far from perfect, but they’re mine.”

I take another sip of water, absorbing everything Evie has told me.

“Who came up with their name, Screw Crew?”

Evie chuckles as she relaxes back against the couch. This is the most we’ve ever talked. I have to admit it’s nice.

“That’s Marcus. He was the first to start with it. If you’ve slept with one of the guys then you’re a Screw Crew babe.”

“Are you?” I drop my eyes from hers. “Sorry, that’s a personal question.”

She gives me a sad smile and shakes her head. “No, I’m not. They have this rule that sisters are off limits.”

I frown, not following. “But you’re not related to any of them.”

“They see me as one, so I’m off limits. It’s a stupid rule if you ask me. There’s only me and Mia, Rhett’s sister. Rhett made the rule when Mia turned eighteen. I think Logan is in love with her. If Rhett just looks in my direction then Logan reminds him of the rule. I think he’s trying to force Rhett to break it, so he can have a relationship with Mia.”

“Logan is the nice one that was on his phone?”

She nods. “He’s always on his phone. He thinks no one knows that he’s constantly texting with Mia, but I’ve had a glimpse at the screen.”

“Why doesn’t Rhett break the rule?”

A sad look shadows Evie’s green eyes. “Mia is his world. He’ll give up

everything to protect her and no one is worthy of dating his little sister.”

“She’s going to date with or without his permission,” I state the obvious. “He can’t expect her not to date while he screws everything in sight.” There’s a flicker of pain on her face, and it makes me regret my words. “Sorry, Evie.”

“You’re right,” she says, shrugging away the pain. “Where Carter is heartless, Rhett is shameless. At first, I used to think that he slept with so many girls to avoid committing to one. With time, I realized that’s just a lie I’m telling myself to lessen the pain. He takes care of me and Mia. He’s committed to us. I’m just a little sister to him.”

“Men are idiots,” I grumble.

Continue Carter and Della’s story ~

[Heartless.](#)

Read on for an excerpt from the first book in Michelle’s exciting Men Of Honor series: PREDATOR, Book 1

PROLOGUE

Cara

“Cara,” Dad calls out to me, “do you have the blanket?”

“Yes, Daddy.” I pull the blanket out of the car and set off after my parents. Unlike most teens, I love being with mine. We have a great relationship. I know I can talk to them about anything. It’s just always been that way with us.

Dad starts the boat motor and then he steers us down the river. It’s a

sunny day with a light breeze to cool the worst of the heat. We always come out here after lunch. This is our family time together. Once we get to the wide open space of the dam, dad starts to slow the boat down.

I spread the blanket open and laugh happily as Mom and I lie down, trying to get comfy. Dad kills the motor when he's satisfied with the spot we're in, and then he comes to lie down on my other side.

"Look at that one," Dad says, pointing to a cloud. "It looks like a car."

I laugh. "Everything looks like a car to you."

"No, seriously," he laughs, too, but carries on, "look, those are the wheels, that there is the roof."

We talk about the silliest of things and then we grow quiet and just listen to the birds chirping all around us. I'm going to miss doing this with my parents, once I'm away at college. I only have a few precious weeks left with them. I drift off, like I always do.

There is a loud crash that yanks me out of my peaceful sleep. I hear my parents scream and my whole body goes instantly cold from shock.

The boat tilts sharply and it tosses my body to the side. I try to claw at the floor, searching for something to grab onto. I slam hard into one of the chairs and it jars my body making a sharp pain shoot through me.

The boat breaks apart with a loud crack, and water swallows the pieces with greedy gulps.

"Daddy! Mommy!" I shout. My eyes dart around, searching for any sign of them, but there is nothing but the boat breaking apart and the awful noise.

What's left of the boat rises sharply into the air, like a beast gasping its last breath. I start to slide down and grab for the chair, but I'm too late. Something knocks hard into my shoulder, only speeding up my decent into the muddy water.

"Daddy," I scream as I claw for anything to stop my fall. Splinters of

wood stab at me, and then muddy water swallows me.

I know how to swim. I'm a good swimmer, but the color of the water robs me of my breath ... it's red. I struggle to get back to the top and it only makes an ice cold fear spread through my body.

I don't want to die!

I hear a louder sound. It's not like the crash. This time it hits at the water, hammering its way closer to me.

The water won't let me go.

White hot pain slices through me and I swallow water.

I swallow blood.



I wake up to a blinding light and I have to blink a couple of times before the light stops stinging my watering eyes. Confusion crashes through me.

Where am I? I try to say the words, but they come out sounding like a garbled groan.

My eyes dart around the room, and then a sharp pain starts to pulse in my back.

Where are Dad and Mom? What happened?

Shuddering sobs ripple from my chest, making the pain so much worse. Hot tears spill from my eyes, slipping into my hair.

"Cara." My eyes jump to the voice and I see it's Uncle Tom, Mommy's brother. "I'm sorry," he says, while getting up from the chair.

I frown, not sure what he's sorry for.

He rubs tiredly over his face and then sighs heavily. "There was an accident. Your parents... they didn't make it."

My parents ... they're dead?

NO! My heart squeezes painfully and then a sharp twinge starts to grow

in my chest. I suck in an agonizing breath, but the feeling keeps growing until I'm hollowed out and only filled with the loss of my parents. On my next breath, sobs start to tear from my throat.

They can't be gone! It's too soon. I didn't get to say goodbye.

My thoughts start to race and panic sets into my bones. They can't be dead ... not my parents.

The reality of never seeing my parents again hits hard, an ache so deep it shatters me. An empty feeling overwhelms me, something I've never felt before. It's like a wave that washes all my happy memories away, leaving only a harrowing heartbreak behind.

I'm too scared to say a word, and my eyes beg Uncle Tom to tell me different. I keep looking to the door expecting Dad and Mom to come rushing in at any moment.

They'll make it all better. They'll take the emptiness away.

"The nursing staff will look after you. Once you can walk you should leave the country." I look at Uncle Tom, confused at his words.

Why would I leave South Africa? This is my home.

He lifts the mattress right under my butt, and the movement jars my body, sending a wave of pain through my back. I watch as he shoves a thick envelope under the mattress before dropping it down again.

"Keep that envelope safe. It has a new passport and some money in it for you. I've arranged a visa for you to go to America, but it's only valid for three months. I could only get you a temporary one on such short notice. You can't stay here. Once you're in America, stick to the small towns and never use your name again. Forget where you come from, or they will find you."

They? Who are they? Why would people be coming for me? I don't understand any of this.

I want to scream as a helpless feeling overwhelms me.

Uncle Tom gently caresses my cheek, a sad look giving his face a haggard appearance. "Leave South Africa, Cara. As soon as you can." He leans over me and places a chaste kiss to my forehead. "Run, Cara. Run far away and never stop!"

I watch him leave and then I'm left alone in the hospital room with only the envelope and a heart filled with sharp pieces of emptiness that are stabbing at my insides with every panicked breath I try to suck in.

For a moment I can only blink and breathe before the reality starts to squeeze at my insides again.

My parents are dead!

I'm alone?

I start to weep, grief-stricken and distressed by all that's happened to me.

I'm only eighteen. I don't know what to do. I want my Dad and Mom.

A nurse comes into the room and smiles warmly at me, but I feel none of the warmth. She gives me something and it starts to soothe the pain that's clawing at my heart.

I know the relief is only temporary, but I welcome the blissful sleep with open arms.

CHAPTER ONE

Cara

“Time to close up,” Mr. Johnson says with that eerily quiet tone of his. In the beginning it used to freak me out, but you get used to stuff like that if you need money. I’ve done so many different types of jobs in my life, but selling stuffed animals must be my least favorite and weirdest.

Mr. Johnson offered to teach me ‘the tricks of the trade’ (his words, not mine.) There is no way I want to learn how to be a taxidermist. I just need another hundred bucks and I’m out of here. I’ve already stayed here for too long.

I live a lonely life, but I’ve grown used to it. It’s just the way it is. It doesn’t help to question something you can’t change. It’s better to just accept that it’s the way my life is going to be.

I now go by the name of Cassy Smith, my mother’s name. Cassy is short for Cassandra and Smith was her maiden name. That was a nice thing of Uncle Tom to do. I feel closer to her that way.

I still don’t understand any of the things that happened to me when I was eighteen. No, I’m lying. I understand the pain, because it’s the only thing that was real and constant.

I don’t understand what happened on the boat, or to my parents. I don’t understand why I had to leave, and why Uncle Tom left me.

I’ve come to the conclusion that life is not meant to be understood – trying will only drive you insane. Life is just meant to be lived, every day a new day with its own problems.

I've been in the US for seven years. Lucky number seven ... right? I can't use my passport anymore. It was only valid for three months, but that was all I needed to find my first job, which was cleaning toilets at a truck stop. It was a shitty job but that's why they let me work there in the first place. Cheap labor.

I keep moving, just like Uncle Tom said. I don't stay longer than two months in one spot. I've been here six weeks already and I'm feeling the familiar itch to run.

I don't make friends and I sure as hell don't grow attached to anyone, and that's the reason why I had to push Steven away. I could see more with him. If you can see more with someone, it usually means trouble. When you're on the run, getting attached to another person is like carrying a dead weight around your neck.

I thought it was a good thing to hook up with him for one night, seeing as he was traveling through Scappoose. He only came to hunt some deer, then he'd head back home.

We had sex, nothing spectacular, but it soothed the craving for another human's touch.

He never left. I've seen him hanging around at the local bar, so I stopped going there.

It's time to leave. I can feel it in my gut.



I shrug on my jacket that's seen better days and I make sure the heater we keep under the counter is off. This store is already an ice box and it's not even winter yet.

While Mr. Johnson locks up in the back where his workshop is, I quickly take out my food for the day. The water in the urn is still warm, so I just pour

some over the cup o' noodles and then wait for Mr. Johnson.

He comes shuffling out of his workshop, and I open the front door so he can just keep shuffling by me. I don't want him to slow down, because then he will find a hundred things to do and I'll be stuck here longer.

Using my foot as a doorstop, I quickly turn the open sign so it shows closed. When we're both out of the store, Mr. Johnson locks the door. He waves tiredly at me, before he shuffles slowly down the sidewalk. I guess I should go home, too.

Home.

There is no such place for me. I move from shady motel to even shadier motel. That's been my life since I ran away from that hospital. I had to run, not for fear of my life, but because I had no way of paying the huge bill. I snuck out like a thief in the night.

I walk slowly and test the heat of my dinner with the tip of my finger. It's cooled down already. I stick my finger in the cup and stir until it looks good enough to swallow. When you've been living off cup o' noodles for years, you don't chew, you just swallow so the stuff can fill your growling stomach. Chewing, now that is reserved for tacos, or pizza, or burgers ... sigh.

"Hi," I hear someone call behind me. I look over my shoulder and see Steven jogging towards me.

"Well, this sucks," I mutter.

He catches up to me and throws his arm around my shoulders. "Where are we going?"

"We?" Oh, buddy, you have high hopes. "We aren't going anywhere. I'm going home."

"I'll walk with you," he says way too cheerfully, as if he'll be getting lucky tonight.

"I'm fine by myself." I shrug his arm away from my shoulders and walk

faster.

“Oh, come on, babe. We had a good time the other night.”

I stop dead in my tracks and glare at him. “One night stand,” I spell the words out for him holding up one finger for emphasis. “That’s not happening again.”

He takes hold of my hand, quite a tight grip, and he starts to pull me into the street.

“I said no, asshole,” I snap, trying to yank my arm free. Alarm bells start to sound through me and nervous tension washes over me.

The cup o’ noodles spills over my hand. “You’re spilling my dinner!” I shriek at him.

He doesn’t seem to care about the loss of my food, and just keeps yanking at my hand, forcing me to move faster.

My stomach drops and for the first time, I actually start to doubt myself.

How well do I really know this dude?

What if he drags me to the park and rapes me? Shit!

What if he’s a serial killer? Shit!

“Okay,” I say a little breathlessly. My heart is racing wildly as panic floods my veins. “You go on ahead to the bar and I’ll meet you there. I just want to go shower the day away.” My voice is pitching. Fuck, he can hear I’m scared.

“Hell no, babe. You’re not going anywhere,” he snaps.

He drags me across the street. I hear the squealing of car tires, and by the time my senses kick into action, it’s too late.

Arms grab me from behind and a piece of cloth is shoved over my mouth and nose.

Cold fear ripples over me as I start to realize that I’m in danger.

A horrified scream tears through my throat as I’m thrown onto a hard

metal surface. I hear a door slam closed and an overwhelming sense of danger floods me.

I manage to yank my face away from the sickly smelling cloth. “Let me go!” I scream, while kicking and hitting at anything.

I try hard to push myself up with my arms, but I keep getting shoved back down.

“Go-Go-Go!” Steven yells. “We’ve got the package.”

Something slams hard against the side of my head and then there’s a sharp prick in my right arm. I try to yank away but it’s too late.

My whole world wobbles and spins.

CHAPTER TWO

Cara

The world blurs and at first, I think I'm still dreaming, and that I'm under water, but then I taste the sweetness on my tongue. I always taste the metallic taste of blood in my dreams and this is not it. This is sickly sweet.

My eyes feel heavy but I pry them open, squinting around me. It's dark and whatever I'm on makes a hollow banging sound as I push myself into a sitting position. I wait for my eyes to adjust but they don't. Shit! It's really dark in here, as if I've been dropped into a pot of ink.

"Hello?" I whisper, because I'm too scared to say it out loud. There's no answer, only the harsh echo of my own pathetically scared voice.

I get up slowly, carefully testing the ground beneath my feet, and again it makes the hollow banging sound. I must be standing on some sort of metal sheet ... I think.

My arms stretch out automatically, scared that I'll bump into something. It's as if my balance just up and left me, and fear sets in, throwing my senses totally off.

I'm too scared to move, but I know I can't just stand here. My whole body starts to tremble as if it only caught on now that we're in a huge amount of shit.

"Come on, Cara," I try to talk some courage into my terrified mind. "Find a way out. You just need to find a way out. Stay calm and don't lose it."

I take small steps forward, my hands shaking terribly. When I walk into a solid wall, my breathing turns to rapid gasps of terror. "No! Shit, where am

I?”

I feel my way along the wall, but find nothing but another wall, and then another ... and another. The space is so small.

“Fuck! I’m so deep in shit. They’re gonna kill me. Oh, God. I’m dead! How did they find me? What did I do wrong?” Panic sets in, ceasing all common sense. I feel my way to a corner and I slide down until my butt hits the floor. I press back against the cold, hard surface until I’m practically one with it.

Dread makes the dark reach at me with clawing fingers. It makes time slow down and the air thin. The horror of my situation makes my insides quiver and my mouth dry.

Seconds tick over into bloodcurdling, terror-filled minutes.

Minutes slither into what feels like unnervingly scary hours.

I don’t know what time it is. I don’t know if it’s night or day outside. I don’t know who has me, or why.

I know nothing but naked terror.

I’m gripping my knees tightly to my chest, rocking myself, when I hear a loud bang against the one wall. I shriek and press further back into the cold metal. What the fuck was that?

I’ve been going through stages. First panic, then fear. Then I’ll start to reason with myself that I will find a way to escape until I’m calm again. Anger comes last, where I start to plan ways of defending myself until I’m filled with rage and I’m imagining ways I’m going to kill whoever has me.

I go from feeling hot to cold in seconds, from crying hysterically to just rocking myself like some crazy person.

But right now, all I feel is paralyzing fear, unlike anything I’ve felt before.

I keep thinking that any second can be my last second.

I keep worrying that I'll run out of air. What if I'm buried and I don't even know it!

I keep imagining dying in this black hole, and no one will ever know.

I hear a key rattle in the door and then light spills into the tiny room. A frightened yelp slips from my dry lips. I quickly scan my surroundings before the light is taken from me. It's only gray walls, a gray floor and gray ceiling. It looks like a tiny box.

Oh God! They have me in some box. They're going to bury me!

My chest starts to tighten and it gets hard to breathe. I break out in a cold sweat and my body starts to shake terribly.

I don't want to die like this.

Hot tears spill over my cheeks but I'm too scared to wipe them away.

The man standing by the door just stares at me, and it's terrifying the crap out of me. He has a rough beard and shaggy, salt and pepper hair. He's larger than the average man. Tall, broad and a stomach that tells me that he lives a comfortable life.

It takes me a moment to recognize him, but when I do, relief washes over me, and for a moment I feel faint and giddy.

"Mr. Attridge?" I croak and then the tears come.

I struggle to stand, using the wall for balance. My legs are a trembling mess, threatening to give way any second.

He used to come over to our house all the time. He, Dad and Uncle Tom were real close before the accident.

But then he scowls at me and he looks far from friendly now. It makes my moment of relief short-lived and the tears dry right up as dread washes over me.

"Cara," he says as he steps into the room. He closes the door and I can't see him anymore.

My heart rate spikes and I flinch when a match lights up the small space for an instant. The small flame makes eerie shadows jump and dance against the steel walls.

He lights a cigarette and then all that remains is the glowing red coal.

“Imagine our surprise when we saw you walk down the road there by Easy’s bar. You look so much like your mother. May she rest in peace.” He takes a drag and the coal glows brighter, lending a creepy quality to the room. “Stupid changing your name to your mother’s. You made it so easy for us to find you.”

He takes another drag, lighting up his face again in a scary red glow.

“Yeah, that was a real stupid thing to do,” he whispers unnervingly making cold chills race up my spine. “So, unfortunately for you we have a score to settle with your father.” I hear him spit. I’ve forgotten how deep his South African accent is. I don’t understand why he would be here.

I start to shake and fear swells in my chest, until it suffocates me. “I don’t understand any of this!” I cry out when the fear becomes too much to bear.

“I know, my girl. I’m sorry, but it’s just the way things are. You know how it works. Children pay for the sins of their fathers.”

The door opens again and three men come in. For a moment I can only make out their silhouettes against the sharp sunlight that’s streaming in behind them. One is holding a camera and he fiddles with the thing until a red light starts to flash.

What the fuck do they need a camera for?

The other two move closer to me and my eyes dart to them.

Steven!

Steven is one of them?

The shivering stills and I can only stare. They’ve been watching me. I got so careless! I forgot that I was running for my life.

“Say your name to the camera, girl,” Mr. Attridge snaps.

“Cassy Smith,” I blurt out. I don’t want to make them angry.

“Your real name!” he snaps irritably and I flinch back from the hostility in his voice.

“Cara Ellison.” My heart pounds in my ears.

“Say the date,” he snaps again.

“October ninth.” I try to keep my eyes everywhere at once, but mostly on Steven and Mr. Attridge.

“Who is Ralph Ellison to you?” He growls and my stomach churns with dread.

“He’s my father,” I whimper.

“Only for ten minutes, men. We only need enough on tape to let that piece of shit know we’re serious. After the boys are done with you your uncle will come running to save you, just like he did when I killed your parents. Don’t be angry, Cara, this is just the way things are done. No hard feelings.” I watch Mr. Attridge with huge eyes, as he hands the cigarette to the man next to him. “Here you go, Henry.” And then he walks out leaving me with the three men.

The door closes and a bright light flickers on from the camera, spotlighting me. Everything else blacks out but the bright light. My body starts to shake and I press back into the cold wall.

What’s going on?

What are they going to do?

A million horrible scenarios race through my mind, tightening the cold grip of panic on my insides.

Henry moves first and comes right at me. He looks like a hulking mass of darkness. I scream and duck to the side, but he grabs hold of my arm, yanking me back.

Where I go, the blinding light goes, and the tiny red light tells me that they are recording all of this.

Henry's voice is a vicious growl that agitates every nerve and leaves my insides quaking. "Don't just stand there! Get your ass over here and hold her down!"

I'm dragged forcefully from the corner. I lose my balance and my knees slam hard into the floor. My teeth clatter and I bite my tongue from the force. "Get the jacket off," Henry barks.

"No!" I shriek and I try to pull back. "Please don't!" I don't know what I'm begging for, but it's all my mind can come up with.

My movements grow frantic with panic and the air grows hot and stuffy with all of us in the small space. The smoke from the cigarette makes me want to gag.

Steven moves in front of the light, making it disappear. For a second I sit shocked before all my senses rush back to me. Henry's fingers dig into my shins and he yanks me towards him. I fall over backwards and my head slams into the hard steel floor, making another hollow banging sound that vibrates through the floor and into my body. I start to panic as a suffocating feeling weighs heavily down on me.

"Fuck you!" I spit at them, and I start to kick with every bit of strength I have in my legs. I manage to kick Henry in the chest, and he falls back on his ass.

I use my moment of victory to scramble to my hands and knees. I crawl away and every movement I make echoes in the tiny space.

Steven comes at me and I rush to get to my feet so I can run, or at the very least defend myself. My flight instincts have finally kicked in. Better late than never!

The bright light makes it hard to see. They pounce on me and the fright

rips a petrified scream from me. So many hands grab at me!

I yank and hit, but it feels like I'm getting nowhere. All I hear is hard breathing, definitely my own and theirs right by me – closing in.

For an awful moment my arms are yanked painfully back, and then my jacket's ripped from my body. My ass hits the floor hard as I'm shoved down.

I keep hitting, kicking and growling like a possessed person. Dread has taken over every part of me. In this terror induced state there's only one thought – survival. I have to survive this somehow.

I always thought fear was cold. I always described it as cold. I was so wrong, so very wrong.

Fear makes your mind terrifyingly crystal clear. It's so you can take in every little thing that's happening around you. Your body runs purely on adrenaline with not a drop of blood pumping through your veins.

I hear the material of their clothes crunch as they move around me.

I feel the air shift as Henry pulls back his arm. I swear my skin stretches thin over my face as I wait for the blow to come.

The not knowing makes it so much worse.

Fear makes pain worse.

Fear makes time stand still.

Fear turns people into monsters and every sound into a warning of what may come.

A fist slams hard into my cheek and my neck whips back from the force. I scream and it sounds desperate to my own ears. Pain engulfs the whole left side of my face, making it pulse with a heartbeat of its own.

Then Henry's horrid voice ripples through the dark. "Get the shirt off!" The growl comes in raspy breaths.

I try to crawl away but they are so much faster than me. Steven moves

behind me and bile burns up my throat. I wish I could vomit all over them. Maybe then they'll stop.

But I don't vomit and my body convulses the second Steven takes hold of me.

I can't just let them beat me!

Shit, what if they rape me?

Oh, God! I won't survive it. Just the thought of one of these fuckers bringing his dick near me, is enough to make me turn into a wild beast.

I try to swing my elbow into Steven. The movement throws me off balance and I fall to the side, swinging at nothing but the stuffy air.

Steven grabs hold of my shirt and then he yanks it up against my neck. For a blinding moment it tightens horribly around my neck, cutting off my air supply. He yanks again and the force snaps my head back. The material bites at my skin and then it's gone. Clammy air sticks to my torso and I feel horribly exposed.

"No! Fuck you! No!" I scream until my throat burns.

"Grab her arms," Henry growls. I see the coal of the cigarette burn red and it lights up Henry's face. Fuck, he looks evil – like the devil himself.

"Let me go!" I shriek. I start to thrash and kick, trying to worm myself out of this impossible situation.

Henry places a knee over my thighs and his left hand comes down hard over my breasts. He forces me back to the floor and then he kills the cigarette against my side. The burn is intense but nothing compared to the fear of not knowing what they are going to do next.

He flicks the cigarette away and then his fist comes at me. The blow makes my eyes bulge with pain and the world starts to spin. A coppery taste explodes in my mouth, making my throat burn with bile.

The next blow feels like he's trying to rip a hole through my face. The

third punch makes the bright light fade, and pain takes over until it feels like even my teeth are aching.

I give up fighting and my body goes slack. Blood floods my mouth, dribbling out the side and down my aching jaw. The last memory I have is a sharp pain in my chest as his foot connects with my ribs.



The dark is killing me slowly. The blinding light scares me even more. I know it's been four days. It doesn't sound like much, but they make a recording once a day for Uncle Tom. I don't think Uncle Tom is going to help me this time. I haven't spoken to him in years. Hell, I don't even know if he's alive.

Every day, Mr. Attridge adds five minutes to the beating. Yesterday, the twenty-five minutes felt like twenty-five years. I thought it would never end.

I'm dreading today! Every sound makes me jump with fear.

Every day, they remove an item of clothing. On day two, it was my sneakers, day three my socks, day four my jeans. They keep taking my clothes away, leaving me with less and less of myself.

I shiver constantly and I don't know if it's from the cold or fear. I only have two items of clothing left.

Day one I was still in shock. I didn't eat when the old man brought food. Day two I forced myself to move. I pushed through the pain after they were done kicking and hitting me, and I ate. It was a struggle to keep it down.

Day three was worse, and yesterday I couldn't keep the food in at all. I think I have a broken rib or two. My right hip hurts the most, as if someone is constantly shoving a fist into my side.

The tiny space reeks of vomit and blood. It smells like death.

The old man never looks at me. He just puts down the food and water and

then he leaves in a hurry. I was playing with the idea of trying to overpower him, but I can't even stand on my own two feet for long, never mind fight a man.

I hear the chain rattle outside and I press harder into the corner, so hard my body screams with pain. I know it doesn't help, but it's instinct. A low growl builds deep in my throat and I sound like an animal, nothing more than a beaten dog.

When Steven comes in alone, I frown. He hasn't taken part in any of the actual beatings. He only holds me down.

I watch him set up the camera on a tripod and then he presses record and the blinding light falls on me.

"So now you're going to beat me? You finally grew a pair of balls, asshole?" I snap at him, angry that I've let the monster touch me.

"No, Henry does the beating," he says calmly. Way too calm for my liking.

He fiddles with his belt and my mouth drops open. I shake my head and struggle to my feet. "I'm not letting you fuck me."

"Come on, babe. It will be like old times."

He unbuttons his jeans and then drags the zip down exposing his boxers.

A fresh wave of adrenaline surges through me and I make a run for the door. I don't even make it halfway when I'm taken down. My body slams hard into the floor, face down, and I scream from the pain tearing through me.

Before I can push myself up, Steven grabs hold of my thighs, dragging me back. I claw at the ground like a feral animal, trying to get some sort of grip so I can pull myself away from him.

Steven crawls over me, pressing me harder into the steel with his full weight.

“Get off me!” I try to elbow him, but he yanks my right hand away, pinning it to the filthy ground. He uses his knees to spread my legs wider and I try to kick back. I try to use my whole body to throw him off so I can get up.

“No!” For a desperate moment I resort to begging. “Please don’t.”

I try to fight back, but lying on my stomach makes most of my attempts useless. My lungs are on fire from my panicked breaths. Anger flares through me and I scream to let some of the hopelessness out.

He doesn’t even bother removing my panties. I feel his dick press against my ass and a wave of disgust makes bile burn its way up my throat.

His fingers shove the flimsy cotton to the side. “No!” I scream as I feel his dick ram against my entrance, but all my struggling and protesting only seems to excite him more. He keeps ramming against me as he struggles to get his dick in while holding me down. I try to clench my legs together but his knees jar my attempts.

He enters me violently on a grunt and I can’t hold back the inconsolable and horrified screams.

“No.” It’s the only word my brain can come up with in this moment of absolute depravity. Sharp burns tear through me.

“Don’t worry, babe,” he grunts breathlessly. “I’ll be quick. You won’t remember this for long.” He keeps thrusting into me, each thrust a scorching stab. I feel exposed and debased. “Tomorrow, Henry gets to shoot your brains out,” he grunts again as his body jerks faster against me. He comes hard, his body shuddering against mine, as if my impending death is the biggest turn on for him. “You didn’t think you were going to live, did you?” I feel his clammy breath on my ear and then he whispers, “But first we all get to have a bit of fun with you. You’ll be begging Henry to put a bullet right between your eyes by the time we’ve fucked you raw.”

He grabs a chunk of my hair and yanks me from the floor as he gets up. I feel the stickiness of his cum dribble down the insides of my thighs, and somehow that makes it all so much worse. I feel filthy and empty, like a piece of discarded trash.

He shoves me closer to the camera and then talks directly to the blinding light. “There’s nothing left of her, Tom. You should have given us the money when we asked.”

He shoves me to the side and I fall hard to my knees. I don’t even bother getting up but instead curl into a fetal position.

I don’t notice him leaving. I don’t notice anything but the wetness between my legs that makes me sick to the pit of my stomach.

Emptiness stretches and grows inside of me, consuming every part that makes me human.

My mind is quiet for the first time, as if it’s switched off.

I’m not thinking of ways to escape.

I’m not thinking of ways to hurt them back.

I’m just not thinking.

What’s the use of thinking? I’m already dead.

They killed my will to live.

CHAPTER THREE

CARA

“Girlie!” The whisper comes from the old man. He’s standing right outside the door. It’s too early for him to bring me food.

Maybe it’s my last meal.

A humorless chuckle bubbles over my lips. Hah! Like I’ll be able to keep anything down.

“Get ready to run,” he whispers.

The door creaks open and my head snaps up, but he’s already gone. I’m not sure I heard him right. Did he say run?

The door stands wide open and sunlight streams in. I can’t move a muscle. I’m scared out of my mind.

I hear gravel crunching under a heavy footfall. A dark figure appears in the doorway and I cower back.

“Please,” I whimper. Yes, I’m begging for my worthless life.

I don’t know how many times I’ve said that word in the last few hours. They’ve degraded me until all that’s left is a beggar, pleading for the crumbs of my life that’s scattered around me.

The man stalks toward me and I whimper, recoiling back like the coward I am. When he kneels down next to me, I anticipate a blow, but instead he shrugs out of his jacket. I press harder into the walls. I can’t take being raped again. They should rather just kill me.

Repulsion and hatred wells up inside me as flashes of the night tortures me. The true nightmare is the memories you have to face when you’re awake.

Every time it feels like you're able to take a breath, they just drag you down deeper, suffocating you more.

"Move forward," the man snaps icily. He doesn't wait for me to move. When he takes hold of my shoulders, his hands are firm. I recoil from his touch, but he pulls me up onto unsteady legs and forces my arms into the sleeves. I hear the zip go up and then I feel his fingers close around mine, taking hold of my hand in a really tight grip.

My first thought is to wonder what kind of rapist dresses his victim.

My second thought is that he's not going to rape me, but kill me, and I'm not sure how I feel about dying.

There were times during the night that I wished they would just kill me. I'm not scared of dying, but rather where I'll end up afterwards. I'm not sure where I'll go and that makes fear bleed into my soul until I'm a shaking, sobbing mess.

"Stay behind me at all times. Do not scream. Do not get in front of me." His voice is hard. It takes a split second for the meaning of his words to sink into my terrified mind. I'm not sure why he's telling me this, and I don't have time to ponder his words because he's already moving and pulling at my arm.

I give my first unsteady step forward and then I have my third clear thought – could he actually be helping me? Dare I hope that he's here to save me?

The second step hurts, and with every movement the stickiness and raw ache between my legs reminds me of the vile things they did to me.

When we reach the door, my breaths are desperate gasps as I try to swallow down the pain and harrowing memories.

"I'll set the room on fire, Predator. You do your job," the old man says to the man holding my hand.

What the hell kind of name is Predator?

He pulls me in behind him and my chest closes up when he lets go of my hand.

Shit, this is it!

Oh, my God. I'm not ready to die.

My heart pounds in my ears and I'm well aware of the fact that each of those heartbeats might be my last.

But then he reaches for me with his left hand and I grab for it desperately.

I don't care what his name is as long as he's here to help me.

'Please let him be here to help.'

"I need my right hand free," he whispers darkly. My eyes dart to his face and I'm filled with horror all over again. This man is easily the scariest thing I've ever laid eyes on.

Every line on his face is pronounced as he pulls a gun from behind his back. I didn't even see it where it was tucked into the back of his pants. My throat and mouth dry right up and I can't swallow the thick spit that's coating the inside of my mouth. He nudges me a little, until I'm right behind him, and then I remember what he said - I have to stay behind him.

I cling to his hand and arm with both my hands. We walk towards a simple looking house. Heat flares up behind me and I glance over my shoulder. The old man has set a shipping container alight.

Then reality dawns on me. I was held in a shipping container. How easy it would've been to dispose of my body.

Fuckers!

"We're going to walk in. We're going to kill them and we're going to leave. You do not touch anything. We don't leave any traces that can lead back to us." The man is so focused I can feel the intensity of the moment rippling off him in waves.

"We?" The word pops from my mouth.

“Glad to see you’re still thinking straight enough to hear what I’m saying,” he says gruffly. The corner of his mouth twitches. “No screaming and no fainting. Oh, and definitely no puking.”

I take a step back from him, humiliated that he can smell the nauseating smell of vomit on me.

He moves first and I only move so I can keep up with him. We don’t run. Everything inside of me is screaming at me to make a run for it, but I stay behind him like a pathetic puppet trailing after her master.

He tightens his grip on my hand when we near the house and I see a muscle jumping in his jaw, which only makes me more nervous.

As we climb the four stairs to the porch, my vision tunnels on the front door.

Why the fuck aren’t I running in the opposite direction?

Why am I just letting him pull me along?

I should be fighting, kicking and screaming!

My mind races from absolute panic to that void filled with emptiness.

I see him lift his arm but nothing can prepare me for the loud bang as he shoots a hole where the lock is. The front door shudders, squeaking at the hinges. And then it all happens in flashes.

Flashes and loud bangs.

Screams and blood.

Men lunge for Predator, but he lets go of my hand, moving fast and with precision, as if he’s done this a million times.

All I can do is stand rooted, my eyes wide with shock and my heart racing like a wild horse trapped in a burning barn.

The world slows down around me yet everything races inside of me.

Every shot he takes hits a target, red blossoms, exactly like you’d see in the movies. Only this isn’t a movie. These are real bodies dropping to the

ground, real blood, real screams of terror and for a change I'm not the one screaming.

"Stay there," he growls. I stand frozen as I watch him shove open a heavy looking door to my right. I hear cursing. "Fuck!" someone yells and then there are more shots.

Any normal person would run screaming from this nightmare, but I stand frozen as I watch them die. I imagined a lot of ways for them all to die, but not this, not such easy deaths. I wish they were burning, just like the container outside.

Predator comes back into the living room. His face looks grim, his eyes constantly searching for a target.

He looks like a predator. Now I understand his name.

His eyes settle on me, and just a look from him makes my heart leap to my throat. He lifts the gun a few inches higher and it points directly at my head. The second it takes for his finger to squeeze the trigger, I look into his eyes. They are cold and calculating. There are no emotions, only a loud bang, louder than all the others and I can't make myself duck for cover. I don't even flinch as I feel a slight burn on my cheek, and then I hear something heavy drop behind me. I exhale a trembling breath as terror makes my blood race hot through my veins.

Shit, he could've shot me! I can't even bring myself to curse him.

"Good girl," he breathes darkly. He takes my hand and he pulls me toward the front door. I do my best not to look at the bodies but my eyes are drawn to them, soaking them in with a crazy sense of relief.

We're almost to the door when I spot the camera. I pull at his arm to get his attention. "Wait, it's the camera." It's lying on the coffee table with the tripod and a small stack of memory cards next to it.

"And?" he snaps. Obviously he doesn't know about it.

“They made recordings of me for-” I stop but I don’t have to say more because he catches on.

“We need a bag. Touch nothing but the bag.” He’s starting to sound really tense. I don’t like that he’s tense. So far he’s been the calm one between the two of us. We can’t both lose our sanity and it’s clear I’ve totally lost my mind already.

We find a paper bag in the kitchen. As we rush towards the living room, my foot slams into something hard and I almost trip. I’ve been trying not to look at the dead faces and blood that’s all around me, but my eyes dart down. I see blood, fuck there’s so much! Then recognition sinks hard to the pit of my stomach. It’s Steven! I recoil back with revulsion.

“Don’t start that shit now. We need to get out of here,” Predator snaps at me. He nudges me forward and with shaking hands I help him shove the camera and memory cards into the bag.

He grabs my hand again and pulls me out the front door. I look straight ahead of me and then I see grass. I yank free and rush forward as if I’ve finally been set free. Once I’m off the porch, I run as fast as my trembling legs can move.

I don’t get far before my legs give way and I eat gravel, not grass. I didn’t even make it that far.

I’m too scared to move.

I’m too petrified to look back at what’s coming.

I hear the gravel crunch behind me and my heart sinks. My insides drop and I start to cry. I sob because not even God will help me.

“Cara.” My head snaps up at the sound of my name. It’s the way he says it, as if he actually cares. It sounds comforting. “It’s time to go. You’re safe now.”

When he crouches next to me, I get my first good look at him. His dark

brown hair is short and neat, shaved at the sides. His face is grim and hard, with a beard that only makes him look grisly and dark. He looks like he's made of stone. Then I see his eyes, gray eyes. Ferocious eyes.

I drop my eyes from his. He definitely has eyes that see everything, just like the walls I was trapped between saw everything.

For a moment emotions threaten to bubble up, to drown me in the horror of what has been done to me, but I close my eyes and focus on the emptiness that's blackening my soul. I'd rather take the empty feelings over the memories of the nightmare I've been living through.

"We're going to leave now. Can you walk?" he asks, ripping me from my dark thoughts. I try to get up but what adrenaline I had is gone now. "Okay, no walking then," he says. His arms slip under me and he lifts me. I feel small in his arms. He's so much bigger than me, but I feel small because there's nothing left of the person I once was.

He walks and I don't even care where, as long as it's far from the container.

It feels like I'm shutting down, my mind, my body, my soul – every piece of me is tired of fighting.

"You're safe. I have you now," *are the last words I hear.*

Continue Damian and Cara's story ~

Predator

Protector

Prologue

Riley~

I've always thought of myself as a pretty happy-go-lucky kind of person. I wanted to save the world, or at least leave my stamp behind.

I've spent the last three years leaving my footprints wherever I felt my help was needed.

In my own naïve way, I thought I could bribe karma. You know - if I do good, then good will come my way. It's worked so far, so why would I have any reason to doubt it?

At the age of twenty-four, I'm happy. It's that contented kind of happiness not many people ever find in their lives.

I have parents who love me. I have two brothers who I idolize, especially my oldest brother, Josh. No one can hold a candle to him.

I'm excited as the plane touches down. *Home ... finally.*

The flight back from Australia was exhausting. I feel sticky and stinky. But traveling was so worth it. I got to take part in the annual Gouldian Finch Count. It was an amazing experience, counting all those colorful birds. Before that, I traveled around Africa for three years, lending a helping hand wherever I could. It made me feel good.

That's the problem, though, isn't it?

I did it because it made *me* feel good. I didn't do any of it for those people I was helping. I didn't do it for the animals.

No, I did it all for me - so karma would have to pay me back in kind.

That's how it works. Right?

I always keep my slate clean. I'm always polite and hardworking. I always smile. I'm the funny one, the shoulder everyone can lean on.

That has to count for something, right?

Josh started this thing where he calls me his shooting star. *Riley-Star*. It caught on in the family. They always joke around and pretend to make wishes on me. I shine so bright. I'm the heart of the family ... everyone's little girl. But every star has to burn out some time.

Life has a way of teaching us lessons.

Karma, now there's a peculiar thing. I never knew how selfish I was until my life was ripped away from me.

Me. Me. Me.

It was all about me.

Chapter One

Riley~

My eyes scan the crowd around me for Josh. I haven't seen him in so long that a nervous eagerness pulses through me.

When they finally lock on my brother, I let out a squeal of excitement. I break out into a sprint, swerving through all the people crowding the airport.

“Josh!” I shriek with happiness. I jump the last distance between us, throwing my whole body at him.

His laughter bursts over my head and then his arms wrap tightly around me.

“Riley-Star,” he whispers and it makes my heart glow with warmth. His voice is hoarse, overflowing with love. His arms tighten around me just as a sob escapes my lips. I'm so happy to see my big brother. It's been way too long.

“I missed you so much,” I whisper, my voice thick with the overwhelming happiness coursing through my veins.

“I missed you more,” he says, setting me down on my feet. His eyes sweep over me and then he shakes his head in wonder. “Did you actually get taller?”

He looks different from when I last saw him. His hair is cut really short, even shorter than when he used to serve in the army. There's a harsh look to his once kind features. I stand on my toes and manage to look Josh right in the eye. The gentleness quickly creeps back into his dark green eyes, the same color as mine, and it makes me smile.

“Yeah, one of these days you’ll be looking up at me.” I can’t keep the laughter from bursting over my lips.

“In your dreams, little sister.” He takes my bags from me and swings one over his shoulder. “Let’s get you home. Mom and Dad can’t wait to see you. Logan even took off from work today.”

My smile widens, hearing that the whole family is getting together today.

“I can’t stay long.” Josh bursts my happy bubble. The smile drops from my face which quickly makes him explain. “We’re busy. Griffin’s covering for me so I could come and get you.”

“How’s Griffin?” I ask.

I haven’t met Griffin face to face yet, but I’ve exchanged a few emails with him. We started writing to each other back when he was serving with Josh. Out of all the men that were on Josh’s team, Griffin is the only one I still write to every once in a while.

After Josh retired from the army, he joined Griffin’s security company. I’m not sure what they do. Josh once said they take on jobs that no one else wants. I hate that Josh risks his life on a daily basis but I understand that working in the security business makes him happy.

“Griffin’s good. Stubborn as always, but good.” He smiles down at me. “Hopefully you’ll get to meet him and the rest of the team soon. You’ll love them.”

“It would be great to finally put faces to the names I keep hearing about, and to see who you spend all your time with.”

On the way home, Josh fills me in on what I’ve missed out on since his last email. “Logan got a promotion. He worked his ass off for it.”

“Yeah, he got the brains and you got the beauty ... tsk, what does that leave me with?” I say jokingly.

“All the luck,” Josh laughs.

“I’m sorry I missed your birthday. I really tried to get home earlier.” I’ve missed too many birthdays and holidays with my family. There’s a lot to make up for.

“Nothing huge, Riley-Star. Only my thirty-fifth. Your big brother is getting old now.”

I start to laugh. “Yeah? Soon I can call you grandpa.”

“Don’t you dare,” he growls. There’s a teasing tone to his voice, though, so I know he’s only joking.

Josh pulls up to the house and I can’t help but stare. It still looks the same as when I left it. Mom’s roses are in full bloom. There’s just something about coming home, it’s the one place you feel centered, where you can fully relax and recharge.

I grab the smaller bag and wait for Josh to haul the heavy one out of the car.

“Act surprised. Mom went all out. She’s been up baking and cooking since the crack of dawn,” Josh warns as he opens the front door.

A smile instantly forms around my lips. That means tons of yummy food. I can’t wait to dig in. It’s one of the things I’ve missed most about home. Nothing beats Mom’s cooking. She’s the best.

Josh lets me walk in first. I drop my bag in the entrance hall and walk through to the kitchen. The house smells divine with Mom’s cooking, making my mouth water.

“I’m home,” I call out, all excited to see my family again. I walk into the kitchen and take a deep breath of the tasty aroma hanging in the air.

“Riley!” Mom shrieks. She comes running towards me and I open my arms wide to brace myself for the impact. She engulfs me in a loving hug.

I smile widely as she starts to jump up and down, still holding me.

“You’re home ... ahhhh ... you’re home!” she squeals with happiness.

She pulls back, frames my face with both her hands and smiles tearfully. “My baby is finally home.”

“Hi, Mom,” I whisper warmly.

“Share her with us,” Dad’s deep voice says from behind Mom.

Mom comes to stand next to me, her arm still around my waist.

“There’s my baby-girl,” Dad says with a proud smile on his face. “You’ve conquered the world. We’re so proud of you.”

His strong arms fold around me and he places a tender kiss to my forehead.

“I missed you all so much,” I whisper, basking in this moment of finally being back with my family.

“Who’s that I hear?” Logan calls from the hallway and then he walks into the kitchen. He shakes Josh’s hand and gives him a pat on the shoulder, before he turns to look at me. “Riley, just look at you.” He grabs me in a bear hug, lifting my feet from the ground. I laugh into his shoulder. “You’re all grown up.”

Sigh ... nothing compares to finally being home. This is my happy place, right here with my loved ones.

“Go put your bags in your room and let me have all the dirty clothes so I can wash them,” Mom says, and then she points to all the delicious eats. “We’ll eat as soon as you’ve finished unpacking. You must be tired from the long flight.”

“Yeah,” I nod. “I’ll unpack it all quickly. I just want to shower the long flight off. I’m getting into my PJ’s and then I’m stuffing my face with all of that deliciousness.”

“You do that, sweetheart.” Mom gives me a loving smile which warms my heart.

I go upstairs, and as soon as I walk into my bedroom, I feel a sense of

homeliness wash over me.

Sigh ... there's just no place like home.

It's been a week since I got home. Everything is still the same as before I left for the trip so it's pretty easy to fall back into my old routine.

During the day I help Mom at the daycare. Mom's always had a soft spot for kids, especially babies, so as soon as I finished school she opened *Tiny Feet*.

Three other ladies help her so she doesn't really need me, but I know she loves having me close to her after I've been away from home for so long. I really don't mind. It gives me time until I figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life.

I plan on surprising Josh with some pizza tonight. I haven't seen him since he picked me up from the airport, which sucks.

Out of everyone in my family I've always been the closest to Josh. I look up to him, the way a little sister looks up to her big brother. I suppose it's because he's always spoiled me rotten. There was never a moment Josh didn't have time for me.

I've always been his little star ... his favorite person.

Traveling to other countries has made me realize just how lucky I am to have the support and love of my family. I do treasure it, even if I don't always show them how much I appreciate them. I plan on changing that, starting tonight. I have something special planned for each of them. I'm definitely going to be spending more time with them so they will know how much I love them.

I know Josh loves pizza and that's why I'm getting it for him as a treat. We're going to have a nice relaxing night where we can just catch up.

I knock on Josh's front door, excited to spend the night visiting with him. Suddenly the door is yanked open and the pizza is slapped from my hands. Fingers dig into my bicep, yanking me forward and into the house.

A panicked sound escapes my lips as I take in the huge man in front of me. His watery eyes make fear slither down my spine.

What the hell is going on? Who is this man? Where is Josh?

I hear a growl from deeper inside the house. "Don't dare touch her! Let her go. She has nothing to do with this!"

It's Josh. He sounds different, though. His voice carries a dark undertone I've never heard before and it makes a sinister fear bleed into my veins.

"Nah," the man snarls, "She's coming, too." He shoves at me and it makes me take a stumbling step deeper into the house. "You saved us the trip of finding you."

An alarm starts to ring somewhere deep inside of me ... something is wrong with this picture.

I get shoved again and take a few more stumbling steps forward. I glare at the huge man for daring to shove me around like I'm nothing.

It still hasn't sunk in that I'm in any danger because I'm still living in my safe little bubble.

Right now, in this second, I still believe nothing can touch my happy life.

Ignorance is bliss.

Funny how you refuse to see danger when it's staring you right in the face. You refuse to admit that just maybe your safe little bubble is not strong enough to keep the monsters out.

But bubbles pop. You can feel the moment when your safety net gives way. It's an earth-shattering shock. It's a devastating blow to the axis that's

supposed to keep your perfect life in place.

Josh comes into my line of sight and I feel a foreign shift in the deepest part of my life. As I gasp in shock everything that makes my life perfect starts to dim. A darkness starts to creep closer, tainting the edges of my world. It's an alien feeling, something I've never felt before. Cold, volatile ... a hostile intrusion.

Josh's face is bloody and all beaten up. He's being held back by two men, each gripping one of his arms tightly. I can see how much of a strain it is for them to keep holding him.

I blink a few times, unable to comprehend what I'm seeing.

"Josh," I finally manage to breathe. I try to move forward so I can get to him, but the huge man yanks me back.

"Let her go," Josh grinds the words out but this time the dark undertone is missing from his voice. He actually sounds scared, and that makes panic and dread wrap forcefully around my heart.

He drops his head forward as if in defeat and begs, "Let her go ... please."

I feel my heart crack at seeing my brother like this. He's always been the strong one ... unbreakable. I can only stare at him with wide eyes. My brain is refusing to comprehend what's happening.

Josh closes his eyes and when he opens them again, they're flooded with pain and desperateness. His legs give way and I watch in suspended dread as my brother falls to his knees.

"Please!" he screams. "Please, she has nothing to do with this! Your fight is with me."

The man starts pulling me back ... away from Josh. I watch the distance grow between my brother and me and it makes the panic I'm already feeling ignite in my veins.

I see his blood smeared all over his face.

I take in the two angry men who are still holding him back ... and it finally starts to fall into place.

I walked into something awful.

This is bad, so very, very bad!

I shake my head as shock ripples over me like tiny thorns pricking at my skin.

“Josh.” The whisper comes from far away, as if it’s being dragged through a wasteland of despair as the reality of what’s happening slams hard into me, making me hiccup with fear.

My pulse speeds up until it makes my blood rush through my veins.

My mind switches over to a higher gear, until all my thoughts are a blur.

The man’s fingers dig painfully into my bicep as if he can feel the realization seeping into me. He yanks harder and as I lose sight of Josh, fight finally explodes inside of my chest.

“No!” I jerk my arm free and rush forward. I run into the living room where I’ve spent so many happy nights laughing with my brother.

The men are busy pulling him to his feet.

“Let him go!” I scream at them and in this irrational moment I actually believe I can take both of them down.

The man holding Josh’s right arm actually smirks at me, as if I’m nothing but a pesky fly.

I reach out and just as I’m about to grab hold of Josh, arms come around me. My eyes meet Josh’s and I see nothing but dismay and despair reflected back at me. I don’t understand why he’s not fighting.

I try to yank free from the tight grip, but it’s useless. I’m just not strong enough.

The man who was smirking just a minute ago moves his right arm and

only then do I see the flash of metal. A gun. For a stunned second I frown, but then I notice the other gun, glimmering in the hand of the man holding Josh's left arm.

These men are armed!

Gears click into place and my mouth dries up with terror. My body goes stiff from the sudden wave of tension that hits me.

These men are going to hurt us badly. I have to do something. I have to get help.

I turn around to run but I'm stopped dead in my tracks as a fist slams hard into the side of my head. The pain is sharp, burning a scorching path down my cheek and into my neck. My whole body flies back from the unexpected blow. I try to reach out ... to grab hold of something, anything. But there's nothing. My shoulder blades hit the floor first, jarring my upper body. The back of my head slams into the side of the wall. A dull ache creeps down my neck and then my vision blurs.

Chapter Two

Riley~

Dreams offer us a way of escaping when there is nowhere to run to, when there is nowhere left to hide.

If only I could dream us to safety.

My memory is a foggy mess. I can't remember everything that happened. I don't know who has us. I don't know why we were taken.

I remember getting the pizza and driving to Josh's house. I remember the smell of the pizza ... but nothing else. My last clear memory is of parking my car behind Josh's.

I've tried calling out to whoever has us, but there has been no response to my pleas.

I have cried.

I have begged.

I have groveled.

I have even prayed.

My eyes keep darting to the other chairs. Mom is closest to me and then Dad. Logan and Josh are at the far end. Every member of my family has been beaten. Mom's one eye is swollen shut. The sight of her face beaten so badly keeps sending shudders through me.

I keep calling to them, wishing they would wake up. They need to wake up. Once they're awake we'll be able to get out of this mess.

I need them to wake up.

I was shocked to see that we're all here. I still don't understand any of

this. Why are we tied down to chairs? Why are we here? What's happening?

Josh starts to stir just as a huge man fills the doorway, and for a moment something looks familiar about him, but the thought disappears as quickly as it comes.

The man grins, and it makes him look evil, like something from a horror movie.

Maybe because I'm so incredibly terrified I give him more power than he actually has. Fear intensifies any situation. I learned this lesson while I was in Africa. Our camp was once ransacked by a pack of hungry monkeys. I was stupid enough to leave my tent to go see what all the fuss and racket was about. There was a monkey right outside my tent. Truth be told, he had a bigger fright when he saw me. He bared his teeth at me, sharp canines. Growling and hissing, his warning said clearly he would bite me if I dared to take what he had come to steal. They left the camp in a mess. We weren't in any actual danger as long as the monkeys didn't feel threatened, but I did almost wet myself when that monkey growled at me, and he was a tiny fur ball, come to think of it. Our tour guide then told me fear intensifies any situation. The monkey had been more afraid of me than I had been of him. I should remember this when facing danger.

Staring at the huge man, I don't think it counts for this situation. The man isn't scared of me, or any of us for that matter, not like the monkey was.

I, on the other hand, am terrified of him. Fear is liquefying my insides. Fear is definitely intensifying this moment for me.

The man starts to stalk towards me like I had seen a lion once stalk its prey on one of the safaris I was on. Back then I found it captivating - but now I'm petrified out of my mind.

"St-stay away," I manage to stutter while it feels as if fear is enveloping me like a thick mist. My feeble plea only makes his lips curve into a

disgusting sneer.

He's bad, all bad. I've read a lot of books where the bad boys have blue eyes, black hair and are ripped with muscles and tattoos. Somehow, those bad boys become the hero later in the story.

I've even spent nights dreaming of my own bad boy kidnapping me and then falling hopelessly in love with me.

Never again will I glamorize a horrible situation.

This man with his watery blue gaze, greasy black strands that hang uneven in his face, is not the bad boy I've read about so many times before. Colorful ink covers his arms, every inch, until it disappears under the sleeves of his faded brown shirt. It's all skulls and knives ... angry tattoos.

He takes another threatening step towards me and it makes me panic and yank at the bonds around my wrists. I have to get my hands free. I have to defend myself somehow.

He shakes his head slowly ... so slowly it's unnerving.

Suddenly, he storms at me and it rips a terrified scream from my throat.

"Oh, my God!"

For a precious moment my mind freezes in absolute terror as the bulk of his body hulks over mine. The sheer shock of my personal space being violated like this shudders through me.

His fist slams hard into the side of my face and it makes me gag with pain. Awful emotions explode inside of me – confusion being the main one. I don't understand why this man is hurting me.

No one has ever touched me in anger. As child my parents didn't even give me a spanking. Physical punishment is a foreign thing to me. I've only known love and shelter my whole life.

Before I can try to make sense of anything, another blow crashes into the side of my head, making my ear ring with pain.

The stink of his sweat wafts up my nostrils and it makes me feel nauseous. It brings me back to the here and now of this awful situation.

The man walks over to Mom and then drags her chair over to the opposite side of the room. Halfway there Mom starts to whimper as she comes to. She tries to lift her head and then looks around her. I see the same horror I'm feeling wash over her face.

"Mom!" I call out to her. "We're going to be okay." Josh will get us out of this mess. Josh always fixes everything. He just needs to wake up.

Next, the man unties Dad and I watch with increasing dread as he drags Dad's limp body over to the other side of the big room. It looks like we're in some sort of warehouse, which only confuses me more. There are some empty crates scattered on the one side and metal sheets on the other. Nothing stands out about this place. I have no idea where we are.

"Dad!" I yell, hoping he'll wake up. He has to wake up. He has to help Josh so they can get us out of here. They need to talk to this man and tell him it's all a horrible mistake.

The man hooks the bonds around Dad's hands to a hook and chain contraption. My mouth opens but the scream doesn't come out. It's sucked back into my chest where it detonates, wreaking havoc with my insides.

Dad ... he's the foundation our family is built on.

My eyes jump to Mom. She's a whimpering bloody mess. I can actually see her body trembling from the pain she must be feeling. She looks dazed, not fully aware of her surroundings.

Who would beat Mom so badly? *Why?* My beautiful and loving mother ... who would be so cruel to hurt her like this, to hurt us all? What did we do to deserve this?

Logan groans, and my eyes dart back to where the man is pulling Logan off the chair and then he drags him to the side of the room. He handcuffs

Logan to a pipe that's bolted to the wall, near the metal sheets. He looks even worse now that I have a clear view of his face. There's a cut above his left eye that's gushing blood. Stupidly I think that he'll need stitches, and that it will definitely leave a scar on his handsome face.

The man grabs the back of Josh's chair and drags him to the middle of the floor and it's only then that I realize he's positioning us in a circle formation around Josh.

Everything slows down until my world becomes a blur and it's hard to focus on anything. It's hard to make sense of what I'm seeing.

I hear a roar of anger as Josh comes to.

Everything will be okay now. Josh is waking up. Josh will fix this mess - because that's all it is - some horrible misunderstanding.

The man comes over to me and he unties the bonds that are keeping my wrists tied to the chair. He hauls me up onto unsteady legs and then his hand slams hard against the back of my already throbbing head. My body loses the will to stand, and I fall to my knees. Pain explodes through my kneecaps, vibrating up to my hips.

Something cold and unyielding comes around my neck and then I'm pulled backwards. Cold steel bites into my neck and I feel it tearing at my skin. I start to gag, making awful noises as my fingers claw at the chain around my neck.

My mind just can't process what's happening. If I process my surroundings, my beaten family, the pain and fear - then it will make all of this horribly real.

"Fuck you!" I hear Josh scream and it sounds desperate ... so desperate it makes my heart shudder with dread. "Let them go! They have nothing to do with this." I hear him sob and then he begs, "Fuck ... please ... please let my family go."

I raise my upper body so I can see Josh. I need to try and offer him some sort of comfort. I hear a weird sound behind me, like metal running over metal, and then the chain around my neck bites at my skin, and I'm hauled up from the floor until I'm standing on the very tip of my toes.

Through blurring eyes I see Josh. He's fighting the restrains that's keeping him tied to the chair. He growl in anger and his eyes dart to each one of us - Dad, Mom, Logan and then me. He looks almost feverish with panic.

I've never felt fear like this before. The three men who have always protected me are tied up and severely beaten. The three men who have given me absolute shelter throughout my life can't even help themselves, never mind me or Mom. The thought paralyzes me. I always thought my father and brothers were unbreakable.

"They're innocent. Please, let them go," Josh cries out as he tries to free himself from the restraints.

"*Innocent.*" The word is spit into the air, and my eyes dart in the direction it came from. Boots scuff on the concrete floor.

I see a pale skinned man, and my eyes widen with fear. It makes sweat bead along the back of my neck.

His neck, jaw and cheeks are covered with rubbery skin that looks like a burn wound. The burned skin makes his left eye drag downwards. He's tall and skinny and seems to be walking with a limp.

My skin crawls at the sight of him. His dark eyes find mine and he gives me a malicious grin that makes my stomach sink to the floor.

That's when I think of it for the first time ... *death*. This man wants to kill me and he's going to enjoy doing it.

All I can hear is my thundering heart and short, panicked breaths.

My whole body goes numb with a suffocating fear as he continues to stare at me.

“There’s no such thing,” he spits the words out, and for a sluggish moment my brain struggles to understand what he’s saying.

The man turns his cruel eyes on Josh and then he says, “How does it feel, Mr. Woods?” He throws his arms wide and sneers hatefully, “Your family is at my mercy.”

“Let them go, Volkov,” Josh says. It sounds more like a hopeless whimper. “They have nothing to do with this. Your business is with me.”

The man nods and he actually looks deep in thought, as if he’s considering Josh’s plea. But then he shakes his head again.

He snaps his fingers. “Dmitri!”

A man dressed in a crisp, black suit walks towards Josh. It’s only then that I notice the other two men as well. They all have heavy looking guns tucked into a strap that rests under their left arms. They look professional and calm.

Dmitri stops in front of Josh. He’s carrying a cracked old bowl.

The scarred man, who I now know is called Volkov, seems to be the one in charge. He flicks his wrist, motioning to the bowl. “I’ll give you something you never gave me, Mr. Woods. You were a coward when you bombed my daughter’s wedding. You show no remorse for taking her life, for taking the life of my son and wife.” He covers his mouth, needing a moment to compose himself and I can see the grief clearly etched into the lines of his face.

Josh hurt this man?

My big brother ... my hero took people’s lives?

Horrified, my eyes dart to Josh. The last bit of spit in my mouth dries up and my tongue feels heavy. I take in a shuddering breath and feel the chain bite into my neck. It reminds me of the horrible position I’m in, of the hopeless situation my family is in – all because of something Josh did to this

man.

Before I can try to process what my brother has done, the man continues, “You will find four items in the bowl, Mr. Woods. Choose one.”

Josh shakes his head. “I won’t choose,” he sobs.

Dmitri shoves the bowl into Josh’s face and growls at him.

“Choose, Mr. Woods, or your family will die the same way mine did.”

A hopeless sound escapes Josh’s throat, and in horror I hear him whisper, “Blade.”

My left foot twists painfully as it gives way. For a frightful moment the chain rips the breath right from my lungs. My fingers dig into the steel as I try to pull it away from my throat. A hoarse cry escapes my lips but I finally manage to find my footing again, giving myself the precious inch I need to suck in the life-giving air. My left foot is burning with a sharp pain, but I force myself to remain standing on it. I don’t want to be suffocated again.

I’m so confused and scared. It feels as if my perfect life has been blown apart and I can’t make sense of all the pieces left in the chaos.

I’ve forgotten about the huge man who hit me until he comes from somewhere behind me. He walks towards Dad and then the gleam of the knife in his right hand grabs my attention.

“Please don’t!” Josh starts to beg. “Kill me anyway you want to, just please ... don’t hurt them.”

“No,” the word is a harsh breath over my lips as the realization hits hard. *The man is going to kill Dad.*

I once heard that hope is the heartbeat of the soul. Whoever wrote that is so very wrong.

Hope gives you a false sense of security.

Hope lets you live in denial.

Hope sets you up for the fall.

Hope only prolongs the suffering.

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Michelle Horst is a Bestselling Romance Author who loves creating stories her readers can get lost in. She loves an alpha hero who is not afraid to fight for his woman.

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