

WITSEC BOOK TWO



ASHLEY N. ROSTEK



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Save Me

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CREED

SHI STORMED OUT, HER BEAUTIFUL PURPLE HAIR SWAYING BEHIND HER AS SHE stomped away. I wanted to chase after her. I knew she was confused and pissed off that we made her leave.

Keelan shut the door and leaned against it with his arms folded over his chest. “I have feelings for her,” he said. This was why I’d stayed put. We couldn’t avoid this conversation any longer.

“We aren’t blind,” I said. I wished I was surprised Shiloh and Keelan had kissed. I looked at Colt. As if sensing me, he looked back at me. We’d known this was coming.

“I want more than just friendship with her,” Keelan said. “And I know she wants that, too.”

“We’re not just going to give her to you,” Colt said tightly. Even though we’d known our brothers wanted Shi, that didn’t make this situation any easier.

Keelan frowned. “I wasn’t going to take her completely. I know how much she means to you.”

“You want to share her,” I suggested, not seeing the point of beating around the bush. “You want in on the relationship Colt and I have with her?”

Keelan nodded. “I want her. Even if it’s only a part of her.”

Knox scoffed from where he sat behind his desk. “You sound like children negotiating over who gets to play with the toy next.”

We all frowned at our oldest brother. I loved him, but Knox could be a real dick sometimes.

“Get down from your high horse, brother,” Keelan said, smirking at him like he was privy to something Knox didn’t want him to know. Out of all of

us, Keelan knew Knox the best. He handled his bullshit the best, too. “We know you have feelings for her, too.”

Knox leaned back in his chair. “You don’t know anything.” He flicked his fingers at us. “What you all are considering is a bad idea. It’s going to end badly. You’ll either end up resenting each other or hurting her.”

“We would never hurt her,” Colt assured him.

Knox looked away from us. “She’s extremely innocent and the three of you horny shitheads are going to try to share her between you?” He shook his head. “You’ll end up traumatizing her more than she already is.”

“Don’t talk about her like that. Shi isn’t weak,” I snapped.

“I know she isn’t weak,” Knox snapped back. “I just don’t want her to be pressured into anything she’s not ready for.”

“We would never do that,” Colt seethed. “That you think we would is insulting.”

“Sounds to me like you’re more worried about us hurting her than anything else,” Keelan pointed out.

“He wants her. He’s just too stubborn to admit it,” I said.

Knox clenched his jaw as his eyes flicked to me. “I don’t want her. I don’t want any part in this relationship the three of you want with her.”

I went to argue, but my phone started ringing. I pulled it from my pocket and saw that it was Shi. I hit the answer button and put the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“Creed.” Her voice sounded strained and tired. It put me on edge.

“Shiloh, you okay?” I asked, but she didn’t answer. “Shi?”

“What is it?” Colt asked as he moved closer to me.

I looked at my phone to see if we’d gotten disconnected. We hadn’t and my phone was still counting the time of the call. I put the phone back to my ear. “Shi?” Still she didn’t reply. “Something isn’t right,” I said out loud.

“What do you mean?” Keelan asked, pushing off the door.

I shook my head and I tried to listen to the background noise. Very faintly I could hear breathing. Shiloh’s breathing. Then I heard a tiny whimper. “Something’s wrong with Shiloh,” I stated as I ran around Keelan and ripped open the door. I could hear my brothers running behind me as I ran past the front desk and out the front door. I looked around the parking lot, searching for Shi’s 4Runner.

Knox came up next to me and pointed. “Her car is still here.”

The four of us ran in that direction, and as we got closer, I could see feet

on the ground on the driver's side. They didn't belong to her, though. They looked like they belonged to a guy.

"Shi!" I yelled.

"Shiloh!" Colt yelled a second after me.

Knox and Keelan outran Colt and I and got there before us. Knox knelt between the cars as we approached. At first, I only saw an unconscious guy on the ground who looked a little familiar. Maybe I'd seen him around the gym before? The next thing I saw was Shiloh a foot away from him with her phone next to her mouth, also unconscious.

"I'm calling the police," Keelan said as he pulled his phone from his pocket and put it up to his ear.

Knox rolled her over and cupped her face. "Shiloh?" The three of us hovered behind him, trying to see if she was alright.

I let out a sigh of relief when she opened her eyes a little. I went up to the guy and rolled him over with my foot. "What did this fucker do to her?"

Colt stared down at the guy and his eyes went wide. "This is the guy that's been bothering her."

Keelan whirled around, having heard even though he was on the phone with the police. "What the fuck, Colt?!"

I looked at my twin in disbelief. "You knew someone was harassing her and you didn't tell us?"

"I saw him hitting on her one time. She said he gave her a bad feeling," Colt said, looking stricken. "Fuck, I should have walked her to her car." He ran his hands through his hair roughly. "Fuck!"

"Help should be here any minute. There's a fire station and hospital just down the road," Keelan said as he hung up his phone.

"Keep your eyes open, Shiloh," Knox snapped, patting her cheeks. "Shiloh!" he yelled when that didn't get her to open her eyes. He grasped her shoulders next and shook them. "Open your eyes, damnit!"

We stood there watching Knox shake her like a limp rag doll and I'd never felt so helpless.

"Check her pulse!" Keelan ordered.

I knelt down next to Knox and put my fingers to her neck. Her pulse was beating. "She has a strong pulse."

Knox began feeling the back of her head and neck. He had a frantic look in his eyes as he did. "Her head seems fine," he said as he continued to look over her body, lifting her shirt and running his hands down her legs. "She's

not bleeding anywhere. I don't understand why she won't wake up." He turned her on her side and a syringe with a needle attached rolled out from underneath her.

We all watched it slow to a stop in shock. "He drugged her." Keelan voiced what we were all thinking.

"I'll kill him," Colt seethed as he moved over to the unconscious guy and kicked him in the stomach. Colt got another two kicks in before Keelan pulled him away. Sirens went off in the distance and got louder as they got closer.

"Let the police take care of him," Keelan said to Colt, trying to calm him down.

Colt was panting, livid. "I should have walked her to her car."

"She's going to be alright," Keelan assured him.

I grabbed Shi's hand and looked at the unconscious guy. I was committing his face to memory. If I ever saw him after today or he came near Shiloh again...I squeezed Shiloh's hand, trying to control my rage. The police needed to hurry up and get here before I tried to kill the fucker next.

Twist. Twist. Pull.

Ribbons of blood slowly rolled up my arms toward my elbows. My pillows were stained with dark red dots and down by the foot of the bed, beneath my ankles, were large copper blotches that had seeped into my gray comforter. The tan ropes tied around each of my wrists and ankles looked as if they had been dipped in red wine.

Twist. Twist. Pull.

I'd repeated that process over and over again—rubbing away my skin against the splintering rope as I did.

How long had it been since Mr. X had tied me to my bed and left me? He had brought me in here when it had still been dark outside. The sun was up now. It had been up for a while.

Twist. Twist. Pull.

My eyes were glued to my open bedroom door, feeling as though Mr. X would appear at any moment. I tried not to let my eyes drift to the tips of Shayla's white sneakers. He had slit her throat just outside my bedroom. Her body was still where she'd fallen. She was dead. There was no denying it now. I had tried to get help—tried to escape. But every window and every door I'd tried had been nailed shut. The only one I hadn't tried was the front door. Mr. X had caught me before I could.

I had a feeling that was the only way out.

Twist. Twist. Pull.

Strangely, the pain of my nerves rubbing against the rope had numbed. Was it my need to escape—my adrenaline blocking out the one thing that could slow me down?

Twist. Twist. Pull.

I had no idea when Mr. X would come back. I wouldn't let myself think about what he would do to me when he did.

Twist. Twist. Pull.

I had to get out of here.

Twist. Twist. Pull.

The rope around my right wrist slid up around my hand. I held my breath as I pulled on it again and the rope squeezed over the rest of my hand, passed over my fingers, and I was free. A new surge of hope rushed through me.

“Oh, Shiii...loooh!” Mr. X sang, his voice echoing from down the hall.

The sound of shoes slapping against the ground pulled me up to just beneath the surface of consciousness.

“Shi!”

“Shiloh!”

Voices called out to me.

I knew those voices.

Faintly, I could feel hands on me, rolling me over onto my back. I desperately tried to open my eyes. I thought I might've. Or it could've all been a dream. Very good dream. One of Knox kneeling beside me and Colt, Creed, and Keelan standing behind him. All of them were looking over me worriedly.

Knox's hands cupped my cheeks. “Shiloh?”

I couldn't form the words to respond. The only thing I could do was keep my eyes open for short periods, and it was a battle each time.

“What did this fucker do to her?” I thought I heard Creed say.

“This is the guy that's been bothering her,” I heard Colt say.

“What the fuck, Colt?!” Keelan snapped. All of them started arguing and I couldn't follow.

Knox's hands patted my cheeks. “Keep your eyes open, Shiloh.” I hadn't realized I had closed them. “Shiloh!” Knox yelled and I felt him shaking me. “Open your eyes, damnit!”

I tried.

Sirens in the distance was the last thing I heard.

The front door was in sight as I crept toward it. I strained to listen for any sound that would give me a hint of where Mr. X was in the house. I heard nothing. Just the hum of the air-conditioning blowing through the vents.

Ten more steps until I reached the front door...nine more steps...eight more...

The wood floor creaked under the weight of my foot. My whole body tightened up as the sound echoed through the silent house. With my heart booming in my ears, I took a quick look around, bracing for him to jump out. When he didn't, I zeroed in on the front door. It was my only hope—my only way out. I rushed the remaining distance, my pace quick and no longer quiet. I lifted my hand, reaching for my freedom.

My fingers barely brushed the doorknob when a hand grabbed me by my hair and yanked me back. I let out a loud, broken scream as my back collided with the front of Mr. X's body.

"I can't let you go." His cold voice was devoid of emotion.

That made me pause. In the nick of time, I caught sight of his knife coming up toward my throat. I caught his wrist and forearm with my hands before the knife could reach me.

He pulled my head back harder, exposing my throat. I let out a strangled grunt as I fought against his strength. His knife inched closer and closer as my arms weakened.

Think!

I took the risk to look around, desperate to find anything that would help me. There was nothing close.

Think!

What would Logan do? I thought back to the few self-defense moves he had taught Shayla and me on our last trip to Texas. We had been at the beach. The memory of Shayla's laughter echoed in my head; she'd pretended to stomp on Logan's instep and dropped to the sand, squealing as she'd crawled away from him. She hadn't taken Logan's lesson seriously but had humored him nonetheless.

I pulled myself back to my horrific reality. With the last bit of strength I had, I pushed Mr. X's blade back a little, then slammed my foot down on his. The moment his grunt reached my ears, I dropped to the floor, losing a good chunk of hair in the process. I refused to let the burning on my scalp slow me

down. I shot back to my feet and hurried for the door.

“No!” he bellowed behind me before a searing pain sliced across my shoulder blade. Crying out, I stumbled and fell against the door. I grabbed the doorknob to keep me from falling completely to the ground. I twisted it, the door swung open, and I felt the warmth of the sun on my skin for only a breath before his arms locked around my waist. Lifted into the air, I thrashed and screamed as loud as I could, hoping anyone might hear me with the door open.

Then I was airborne. The air was knocked from my lungs as my spine slammed against the wooden stairs. Mr. X braced himself above me by holding himself up with one hand on the step behind my head. “You are mine!” he roared in my face. Spittle hit my cheeks and his rancid breath filled my nose. My breath hitched. Not from the smell. But from the excruciating pain that exploded in my stomach.

He stabbed me.

His knife was buried in my stomach. Time slowed as he withdrew. His eyes were dilated, emotionless, pitch-black depths as he stared down at me. Blood clung to his black and gray stubble along his jawline and chin. “No one else can have you,” he said, sounding detached as he plunged the knife back into my stomach.

I didn’t know why I put my hands on his shoulders as he withdrew the knife again. I didn’t know why I met his eyes or why I asked him, “Don’t you love me?” I didn’t know what possessed me to say that, but it made him pause and I could have sworn I saw regret in his eyes. I took that as my chance to ram my knee between his legs. He made a choking noise. His hand that was holding him up gave out and he fell on top of me. Shoving him to the side, I rolled off the stairs to the floor. With a hand pressed to my bleeding abdomen, I forced myself to my feet.

I made it out the open front door into the blinding sunlight. “Help me!”

Eyes flying open, I shot up from where I was lying and pressed my hands to where Mr. X had stabbed me. The first thing I saw was Keelan. He was standing next to the bed I was lying on. He put his hands on my shoulders. “Shilo—”

“Help me!” I begged him, trying to climb out of the bed, but his grip on me kept me where I was. “He stabbed me.” My voice shook as I spoke. I pulled my hands away from my stomach to show him the blood. My hands came away clean. There wasn’t any blood in sight. Even the light gray shirt I was wearing was spotless and intact. No—it wasn’t a shirt. It was a hospital gown, and I was in a hospital bed.

I quickly glanced around the room. Another surprise was that Knox was standing at the foot of my bed, staring at me with his signature frown.

Glancing back down at my trembling hands, which weren’t covered in blood, I doubted what I was seeing. “He stabbed me,” I said again. It had just happened. I had felt it. I had felt the knife tear through my skin and bury itself deep.

“Shiloh,” Keelan said gently.

I heard him. I just couldn’t take my eyes off my hands. I didn’t understand. What was happening?

“Shiloh!” Keelan barked, startling me out of my trance. I met his wide, golden-brown eyes. “You weren’t stabbed, baby girl.”

Knox finally spoke. “I don’t think she’s talking about what happened with Jacob.”

“Jacob—” I started to say, when the door leading into the room swung open.

“The coffee tastes like shit,” Creed announced as he walked in. Colt came in next, a step behind him. They were carrying two Styrofoam cups, which I assumed were filled with coffee, in each of their hands. Both looked weary. Once they saw me, though, they perked up.

Colt opened his mouth to say something, but snapped it shut as he took me in, then Keelan and his hands still on my shoulders. “She looks scared,” he said, setting down his two coffees on the small rolling table that was at the foot of the bed.

Keelan dropped his hands from my shoulders. “She just woke up.”

“Nightmare?” Creed asked as he came to stand on my left, next to Keelan.

“Yeah,” Knox said.

Moving to the right side of the bed, Colt sat on the edge and pulled me into his arms. My whole body went stiff. That was, until I breathed him in. His smell...it was comfort. I buried my face in his shoulder and my body relaxed with a shuddering breath.

“I’m safe,” I said out loud.

The left side of the bed dipped and a hand grabbed one of mine. I knew it belonged to Creed.

Creed squeezed my hand. “You’re safe, Shi.”

I squeezed his hand back. “Jacob—” My voice trembled. I remembered everything that had happened. Leaving the gym. Finding one of my tires flat again. Jacob showing up, offering his help, and when I’d declined, he’d become insistent and then violent. “He—” My whole body shivered.

Colt’s arms tightened around me. “He’s been arrested.”

That was good. “I fought him.”

“Yeah, you did,” Keelan said. “You choked that bastard out and I’m so proud of you.”

“Not before he drugged me,” I grumbled, pulling away from Colt. “He wanted to...” I glanced down at my lap. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does, and it’s not okay,” Knox said firmly.

No, it wasn’t okay that Jacob wanted to rape me. Why didn’t that knowledge shock me? I tucked my hair behind my ears and bent my knees to my chest. “How long have I been here? A few hours?”

They glanced at each other.

“It’s eight in the morning,” Knox answered.

Shocked, I kicked off the blankets. “I’ve been here since yesterday!” I leapt forward and clambered around Creed to get off the bed.

“You’re giving us a great view of your Deadpool underwear,” Creed said.

I whirled around to face them as I closed the back of my gown. “Logan is going to kill me.”

“Because you flashed us?” Keelan asked, fighting to hold a straight face.

I will not blush. I will not blush.

“Because I missed my check-ins. Again.” I spun back around and searched for my purse. It and my clothes were in a clear plastic bag on one of four chairs in the room. I quickly scooped up the bag, but paused as I took in the chairs. Four seemed like a lot for such a small room. Turning back to face the guys, I asked, “Did you all stay here with me?”

Colt stood from the bed. “We stayed until visiting hours ended. They only allowed one of us to stay after that. So the rest of us hung out in the waiting room until they let us back in here.”

Someone could have knocked me over with a feather. I was so shocked, yet so happy. Possibly the happiest I’d felt in I didn’t know when. “Who

stayed in here with me?”

Colt, Creed, and Keelan all glanced at Knox.

“It doesn’t matter who stayed in here,” Knox grumbled.

I was getting ready to throw his words, “yes, it does,” right back at him when he said, “I called your uncle.”

My heart skipped a beat. “What?!”

LOGAN'S GOING TO KILL ME, I THOUGHT AS I DUMPED THE BAG HOLDING MY stuff on the bed. "Which phone did you call him on?" I asked as I grabbed my leggings.

"On your personal cell," Knox answered.

I yanked my leggings up each of my legs and to my waist under my gown. "I need to know exactly what was said."

Knox crossed his arms over his chest. "I told him my name and he knew who I was."

"He did a background check on everyone living on our street before I bought my house," I said. "And I've talked about you guys with him."

"That seems like a misuse of power," Keelan commented under his breath.

I couldn't argue with that. "And I doubt he lost any sleep over it, but that's my uncle. He was a Navy SEAL before he became a Marshal. Some of his old SEAL buddies are higher-ranked feds now and some went off to work for...well, we'll call them *agencies*, after they left the military. He has a lot of connections."

"Why'd he become a Marshal then? Why not work for an agency or become a federal agent?" Creed asked.

"He hates politics and my mom had threatened never to speak to him again if he became a spy. She was terrified he'd die. She used to say that he used up all his luck surviving the SEALs," I explained. "Not wanting to upset my mom, he settled on being a Marshal."

"Were they that close? Your mom and uncle?" Colt asked.

I nodded. "Logan and my mom are—were fourteen years apart. My

grandparents had him late in life and then they both passed away by the time he was seven. My mom dropped out of culinary school and worked two jobs to raise him. They struggled to get by for a while, but it bonded them. Then my dad showed up, or asserted himself in their lives, as my mom would have said.”

“Sounds like someone I know,” Knox mumbled.

I rolled my eyes and continued on. “My dad used to tell Shayla and me all the time that he fell in love with our mom the first moment he laid eyes on her and knew that the only way to get her to be his forever was to love Logan, too, because Logan and my mom were a package deal,” I said with a smile. “For as long as I can remember, I don’t think my mom and Logan went more than a day or two without talking.” My smile dropped. Logan had lost that.

I cleared my tight throat. “What else did you say to him?” I asked Knox.

“I told him what happened. That Jacob attacked you and you fought back. He asked if you *killed the bastard* before asking if you were alright,” Knox said, with an incredulous tone.

Typical Logan.

“He didn’t sound worried until after I told him you were drugged and on your way to the hospital,” Knox finished.

That was what I was dreading. “He’s on his way, isn’t he?”

Knox nodded. “He said he’d be on the next flight.”

Which meant he could be here any minute. It wasn’t that I wouldn’t be happy to see Logan. I missed him a lot, but if he found out that the guys knew the truth about me, he’d take me away and I would never see them again.

I pulled off the hospital gown and tossed it on the bed. “You guys can’t be here when he arrives,” I said, glancing at them. They weren’t listening. Their attention was captured by my chest. Normally, I’d be embarrassed to be seen in my bra and have my stomach scars on display. At the moment, I didn’t have time to care. “If he gets the slightest hint you know more than you should, he’ll relocate me.” Just as I scooped up my shirt, I caught Knox’s gaze dropping to my stomach.

I saw surprise flash in his eyes before they narrowed in anger. “He stabbed you.” It wasn’t a question.

I paused for a breath, dropping my gaze to the floor before pulling my shirt over my head. “Twice.” I sat in one of the chairs to put my shoes on. “With a chef’s knife. I lost so much blood, I almost didn’t make it to the

hospital.” My tone was factual, detached, because on the inside I was fighting not to let my mind wander to that night.

“That’s what you were dreaming about?” Keelan asked.

I looked down at my hands. If I stared long enough, I could picture them covered in blood. I flipped them palm-side up. Tiny scrapes and cuts dotted them. Jacob grabbing my ankle as I tried to get away played in my head and I had the phantom feeling of the gravel piercing my palms as I landed on them.

“Shiloh?” I faintly heard before a hand slid into mine. I looked up in time to see Colt sit in the chair next to mine. He held a worried expression. “You checked out.”

I squeezed his hand. “I want to go home.”

Without saying a word, Knox moved toward the door, but as he went to open it, there was a knock. My first thought was that it was Logan. My second thought was that he wouldn’t have knocked. He would have stormed in like he owned the place. Knox opened the door. His tall, bulky body blocked my view of who it was.

“You must be Knox,” a familiar voice said.

Knox stepped aside, revealing a tall man wearing a navy, iron-crisp suit. My eyes snagged on his long red tie before jumping up to his chestnut hair and ice-blue eyes framed by black-rimmed glasses that had always reminded me of Clark Kent’s.

“Ian?” I blurted out, surprised.

He stood confidently in the hall with his hands in his pockets. A tiny smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Hey, kid.”

The guys looked from me to Ian and back again.

“Where’s Logan?” I asked.

Taking that as an invitation, Ian strode in. He took in the guys and the layout of the room with one quick glance. I knew he had committed all the exits, possible threats, and things that could be used as weapons to memory by the time his eyes returned to me. I knew that because Logan did the same thing when entering a room. It was due to their training. Once a SEAL, always a SEAL. “He couldn’t get away,” he said, his eyes dropping to my hand in Colt’s for a blink. When they flicked back to mine again, his brows slightly rose in question.

Knox came to stand next to him. “And you are?”

Ian gave him a charming smile and held out his hand. “Ian. Family friend.”

Knox's eyes narrowed in a scrutinizing way as he shook his hand.

Ian's charming facade didn't waver. "Logan told me to thank you for your call. I was happy when I heard Shiloh had made...connections here. Well, ones close enough to know who to call if she was ever in trouble."

His words put me on edge. "They were just getting ready to leave." I gave Colt's hand one more squeeze before letting go and standing.

Ian's attention returned to me. "I guess I had perfect timing. I can take over."

I looked to Keelan, catching him already staring at me. He was the best at picking up social cues and he didn't disappoint. He gave me a slight nod. "We need to get going." He put a hand on Creed's shoulder and ushered him toward the door. Colt stood and touched my lower back. Ian didn't miss that.

"Call us when you get home," Colt said.

I nodded. I could see that Colt was reluctant to leave, but he moved away from me with a clenched jaw.

"Let's go, Knox," Keelan said from the hall.

Knox didn't budge. Instead, he looked from Ian to me.

I held his intense gaze. "I'll be fine," I assured him.

"You've never mentioned him, Shiloh," Knox said.

"Oh? And what has she told you?" Ian fished.

Cheese and rice! "That's because he's my uncle's lover," I blurted. "My uncle isn't out of the closet yet. So out of respect for him and to avoid too many questions, I don't talk about Ian much."

Ian didn't react. He just blinked at me.

I looked back at Knox. "I'll let you know when I'm home."

Knox glanced at Ian with a look that wasn't friendly. It almost seemed threatening.

That didn't faze Ian in the slightest. "I'll make sure she gets home safe."

Knox relented and finally left with his brothers.

"Fascinating," Ian said as he shut the door.

"What?"

Ian strode past me to sit in one of the chairs. "I can't tell which one you're dating. I thought it was the young twin you were holding hands with, but now I'm not so sure. All four of them clearly have feelings for you and you, them."

"I've told you not to do that profiler crap on me," I grumbled, as I sat in the chair farthest from him.

He noted that with a smirk. “My presence is making you nervous. I’ve never made you nervous before. There must be something you don’t want me to know.”

“Cheese and rice, Ian, what did I just say?”

“Fine.” He leaned back in his chair and propped his ankle on his knee. “I’m looking forward to telling Logan that we’re lovers.”

“I seriously doubt you’ll both ever be here at the same time and have to put on a believable act.”

“Even if we were, I doubt we’d have to. You’re still a terrible liar.”

“Would you prefer I was a better one?” I asked.

“Right now, I need you to be,” he said, his voice turning serious. “The local police pulled in after I did. Any minute now, your doctor is going to come in to assess you, then ask you if you feel up to speaking with the police about what happened.”

I did my best to stay calm. Ian was obviously here to make sure I didn’t mess anything up. “What do I do?”

“You tell the truth...as Shiloh Pierce,” he answered, and then there was a knock on the door just before an elderly woman, with long white hair, poked her head in.

“Knock, knock,” she sang with a soft voice as she walked into the room. She wore a white coat over navy scrubs. Her honey eyes looked to the empty bed before zeroing in on me. “I’m Dr. Regan. It’s good to see you’re up. How are you feeling?”

As Ian had said, the doctor looked me over, told me I was cleared to go home soon, and as if it were scripted, she told me about the police wanting to see me. Wanting to get it over with, I told her to send them in.

Two cops in dark blue, almost black uniforms came in after she left. One was a man, who looked to be in his late twenties, and the other was a middle-aged woman. The woman—Officer Mendez—did most of the questioning and her partner, Officer Reynolds, only chimed in a few times. The questioning was pretty straightforward. I told them what had happened and went over my interactions with Jacob leading up to the attack. I was a little worried it would be his word against mine, but apparently the attack, up until he’d pulled me to the ground between the cars and out of sight, had been caught on the gym’s security cameras.

“You’re a tough cookie,” Officer Mendez said. “You’re handling this really well.”

Her statement shook me to my core.

“I don’t think it’s sunk in for her yet,” Ian said, covering my lack of response.

Officer Mendez eyed Ian. “Are you family?”

“Family friend,” Ian replied simply.

Mendez looked back at me. She looked like she wanted to ask more, but kept her mouth shut. “I think that’s all we need for now.” She pulled out a card from her pocket. “This is my number if you have any questions.” She held out the card to me and I took it. “We’ll be in touch,” she said, and she and her partner left.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Ian commented as he smoothed down his tie.

“Why are you here?” I asked a little snappishly. “What was so important that kept Logan from coming?”

“He couldn’t get away.”

I glared at him, feeling overwhelmingly irritated. “That’s not like him. He would have dropped everything—”

“It wasn’t safe for you,” he interrupted. “Coming here could lead X right to you.”

A million questions filled my head at once and before I could begin asking them, Ian continued on.

“We’ve made sure it’s public knowledge that Logan is offering his expertise to help catch X. He’s been seen and photographed at many press conferences. It is our hope that it will lure X out.”

“You’re using him as bait?” I questioned with panic riding my voice.

“Logan is X’s only lead to you.”

I stood from my chair to put more distance between us. Giving him my back, I crossed my arms over my chest tightly. I had to hold my breath. It was the only thing I could think of to help keep myself together on the outside, because on the inside, I was falling apart.

“It was Logan’s choice.” He let out a sigh. “I know it’s scary, but—”

I whirled around to face him. “You don’t know!”

His eyes widened at my outburst.

“You have no fucking clue how scary it is,” I seethed. “Logan is all I have left.”

“With your uncle’s help we might be able to catch X.”

“Why does it have to be him?” I shook my head, frustrated. “I know how selfish that sounds, but haven’t I sacrificed enough? Christ, Ian, it’s been well

over a year. Why haven't you caught him yet?"

Ian's gaze dropped to the floor. "If it makes you feel better to blame me, I can live with that. But you should know that no one forced Logan to help. He offered."

Logan had told me that Ian had called him in. He had made it seem like he'd had no choice. He had lied to me.

Finally meeting my eyes again, Ian stood. "He lost his family, too, Shiloh. Do you really think your uncle is the type of man to just sit around and wait for justice to be served?"

No. He wasn't.

"I'm not dumb enough to think that if Logan catches X, he'll hand him over to be prosecuted, but I'm sure as hell pretending to be," he admitted, his shoulders slumping a little. "X has killed six girls in less than a year. I will take all the help I can get."

My stomach dropped. "Six?"

"He's killed two more girls since we last spoke."

"I only knew of the one you told me about," I said.

"It wasn't public knowledge that the first three were connected. They happened in different states."

"How did you know they were connected?"

Ian hesitated. "Your picture has been stapled to all the victims' faces. After the fourth girl was found, we couldn't keep things under wraps anymore."

"That's messed up and you know it. You should have warned people sooner."

"And tell them what?" he asked. "That young brunette girls are being targeted all over the U.S.? We needed more time."

"For what?"

"His face has been plastered all over the news, yet no one has seen him. He's evaded everything we've tried to catch him. By pure luck, one officer stumbled upon him, and X killed him." Anger seeped into his voice as he spoke. "When criminals have gotten away with so much, they start to feel like God—like they're untouchable. They get too confident and they make mistakes."

"So you let him continue to kill—"

"I'm not letting him do anything," he snapped. "I can't stop him if I can't catch him."

I plopped back in a chair. “So he’s become a serial killer.”

Ian nodded. “And he’s already searching for his next victim.”

“One who looks just like me, because he can’t find me.”

He studied me, probably taking in everything from my posture to my shallow breathing. What looked like sympathy entered his eyes. “You shouldn’t do that to yourself. Don’t take on his guilt.”

“I’m trying not to...” I squeezed my hands into fists. Since I’d lost my family, I’d felt like I’d been pulled to the bottom of the dark ocean. Sometimes I could see the faint light of the surface, but no matter how much I moved my arms and kicked my legs, I could never reach it. I was running out of air and I was tired. So tired. Right now, I couldn’t see that light. How could I fight to swim toward something if I couldn’t see it anymore?

“Shiloh?” Ian said with concern in his eyes.

I was done talking to Ian. I didn’t want to hear anymore.

Ian touched my shoulder. “You need to breathe.”

I didn’t want to be here anymore.

I wanted to feel safe.

I wanted to go home.

I didn’t have that anymore.

All I had now was an empty house to return to.

The only place that felt remotely like a home was when I was over at the guys’ house.

The guys.

Their faces popped into my head. If they were here, Colt and Creed would hold me while giving me words of encouragement, Keelan would say something to make me laugh, and Knox would push my buttons. Thinking of them, I was able to suck air into my lungs.

“That’s it,” Ian said, rubbing my back. “Deep breaths, kid.”

I ignored him. He wasn’t helping. If anything, his presence was making things worse. I kept my thoughts on the guys. “I want to go home. Now,” I forced out.

Ian stood from his chair. “I’ll see what I can do to speed things along,” he said, heading for the door. Just before stepping out into the hall, he looked back at me. “For what it’s worth, leaving you was probably the hardest thing Logan’s ever had to do.” As he walked out, he added, “You’re all he has, too.”

MY WHOLE BODY SAGGED THE MOMENT I WALKED THROUGH MY FRONT DOOR after Ian dropped me off. I had felt relieved when he had told me that he was going back to the airport after he took me home. That man could sniff lies out better than a polygraph and I didn't want to spend any more time with him than I had to.

Dragging my feet, I went to the wall where the alarm was to put in the code. I froze, fingers hovering over the keypad, when I realized that it wasn't going off. I had set it. I always set it before leaving, yet it was disarmed.

Fear surged through my exhausted body. I moved to the coffee table and grabbed the gun that was taped underneath. Doing my best to be quiet, I pulled back the slide on the .40 caliber, cocking it. I winced at the loud sound of the gun clicking as a bullet moved into the chamber and the slide snapping back into place.

I need to leave. I need to run, I told myself as I crept and peeked into the kitchen. It was empty. I moved toward the hallway next. My heart pounded so hard in my chest it hurt. As I was about to reach the hallway, I leaned against the wall, gun clutched in front of me. Slowly, I peeked around the corner and down the hall. The spare bedroom door was open, as I had left it. The spare bathroom door was open, as I had left it. The panic room was closed, as always. My gaze landed on my room all the way at the end of the hall last. The door was open, as I had left it. I hadn't known I was holding my breath until I saw who was sleeping in my bed. It was Colt and Creed. I exhaled, relieved, and pulled back from peeking down the hall to rest my head against the wall. My knees gave out on me and I slid down to the floor.

My eyes burned as my adrenaline crashed. I sat there for a little while,

focusing a great deal on breathing.

When I was able to pull myself off the floor, I put the gun back under the coffee table. Careful not to wake Colt and Creed, I got into the shower. As I washed, I noticed a few bruises I had gained thanks to Jacob. There was a really sore one on my thigh where he'd stuck me with the needle.

Wrapped in a towel, I entered my room to get dressed. Colt was sitting up against the headboard. He was shirtless. Both of them were. "Hey," he whispered as he rubbed an eye tiredly.

"Hey," I said back quietly, my voice sounding vacant even to my own ears. He noticed, too. I could tell by the way his tired eyes instantly became focused on me. I turned away from him and busied myself with pulling an oversized shirt and a pair of underwear from my dresser. Then I went into my closet to put them on.

"Do you want to talk about what happened?" he asked.

I slowed my dressing for only a breath. "Not right now."

"Can you at least tell me how you're feeling?"

After I was dressed, I stepped into the doorway. Meeting Colt's eyes, I leaned against the frame with my arms folded across my chest. "Too much," I answered honestly. "I'm feeling too much."

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked, concern furrowing his brow. "Do you need anything?"

A cigarette? Alcohol? A long run that will allow me to outrun what I'm feeling? I wanted all three, but I wouldn't tell him that.

Creed let out a tired groan. "What she needs is to get her butt in this bed so I can hold her."

I definitely needed that. Pushing off the wall, I walked over to Creed's side of the bed. Before I could attempt to clamber over him to get in the middle, Creed sat up and hooked an arm around my waist, pulled me off my feet, and laid me between them. His arm never released me as I got under the covers and settled on my side, facing Colt. Both of them scooted closer. Creed molded his body along my entire back side. Colt grabbed the back of my knee and hiked it over his hip. His pelvis pressed against mine, sandwiching me between them. Colt moved his head close enough to press his lips to my forehead and stayed there.

"We missed school today," I said randomly. Even though I'd been unconscious all night thanks to the drugs Jacob had shot into me, I was still exhausted. It was comfortable lying between them, and I felt safe enough to

relax, but my brain wouldn't let me.

Colt ran his hand up and down my arm. "It's alright, babe. Just try to relax and rest for a little while."

"It's Thursday. You have a meet tonight," I said. Well, Colt had a meet. Creed was suspended from the swim team for the next two weeks. Gabe had thrown me into the school's pool and Creed had tried to rearrange Gabe's face with his fist. Was it wrong that I found that attractive? Not the violence, but the way he came to my defense. They were both like that and it felt really good to have them in my corner.

"I'm not going to the meet," Colt said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I'd rather be home with you," he replied.

"But—"

Creed sighed into the back of my neck. "Shi."

I groaned. "I'm sorry. My brain won't turn off."

"Do you want me to help you relax?" Creed asked, moving his hand down my abdomen. My stomach did a flip and all my blood rushed in the direction he was headed.

Colt grabbed Creed's wrist, stopping him from touching me lower. "She doesn't need that after what she's been through."

Creed pulled his hand away. "You're right."

I grabbed Colt's hand before he could move it out of my reach. Heat bloomed in my cheeks as I met Colt's eyes. "Maybe I do need it," I said, pulling his hand to my stomach.

Colt's eyes bored into mine. "Are you sure?"

They were the only good part of my life, especially right now. I trusted them. My feelings for them grew with each moment we spent together. I was ready and wanted to connect with them in every way possible. "Yes," I said, releasing his hand.

Creed's fingers slid up my thigh and grasped the end of my shirt. He pulled it up and out from under Colt's hand until the shirt bunched around my ribs. Creed released the shirt to slide his hand under it. I inhaled deeply as his warm palm cupped my breast.

Colt watched my face, taking in my reaction to Creed touching me. He didn't look away as he trailed his fingers lower and lower until he reached the band of my underwear. Creed brushed his thumb over my nipple at the same time Colt's fingers dipped into my underwear and smoothed over my mound.

Colt's middle finger pressed down on my clit and began rubbing circles over it, while Creed tweaked and tugged on my nipple. I grabbed Colt's bicep as my breaths turned into pants. Colt added pressure to his circling that coaxed little whimpers from me and I closed my eyes to chase the pleasure.

A hand came up under my chin. "Don't close your eyes," Colt said in a deep, husky voice.

I forced them open, meeting his hooded aquamarines as his middle finger glided away from my clit to my wet core. Battling to keep my eyes open, my brow furrowed as his finger dipped inside me slowly. He brought the heel of his palm down on my clit as he withdrew his finger and pushed back in. He repeated the process over and over again. I let out a moan when his pumping finger was joined by a second.

Creed continued to tease my nipple and massage my breast. Brushing his nose along the shell of my ear, he whispered, "I could cum to the sounds you make."

His words made me shiver, which caused me to bump my sensitive clit against the heel of Colt's hand. It felt good. Too good. So I did it again and again, rocking my hips and grinding that little bud of nerves against his palm.

Creed's hand moved to my other breast. "That's it, Shi. Ride his fingers."

A groan escaped me, and Colt cut it off with a kiss. His tongue briefly touched mine before he pulled away. "I think she likes it when you whisper filthy things in her ear. She squeezes around my fingers every time." He curled said fingers inside me and hit a spot that made my toes curl and a pressure build at the base of my spine.

"Do that again," I begged.

A grin tugged at the corners of Colt's mouth. "This?" He curled his fingers as he pumped them inside me and hit that perfect spot again.

"Yes!" I cried out.

Creed chuckled behind me. "Do you want to cum, Shi?" he asked as his hand left my breast and moved down.

"Yes," I panted.

As if in sync, Colt moved the heel of his palm away from my clit just as Creed slid his fingers over it. Creed began working that little spot with vigor.

"Please don't stop," I pleaded as my orgasm built and built until it erupted. "Please. Don't. Stop." My entire body shuddered as the best feeling in the world rippled through me in intense waves.

Once my orgasm faded, Colt pulled his fingers out of me and out of my

underwear. Creed didn't move. He continued to hold his fingers over my pulsing clit.

Breathing heavily, I watched as Colt put his fingers inside his mouth and sucked them clean.

"Do I taste good?" I asked.

Colt gave me a smirk that was proud and sinful. "Yes, you do."

I grabbed Creed's hand and pulled it out from my underwear. I brought it up to my mouth. Colt's smirk dropped and heat filled his eyes as I licked the tip of one of Creed's fingers. I tasted kind of sweet. I took the rest of Creed's finger into my mouth and sucked it clean like Colt had done to his fingers.

They both groaned.

"Cheese and fucking rice," Creed cursed. As soon as his finger was free from my mouth, he pulled his hand away and rolled onto his back. He ran his hands down his face. "That was hot as hell, yet so, so mean to do when I'm trying to be good."

I looked at Colt. "Did I do something wrong?"

Colt shook his head. "Ignore him." He pulled me with him as he also rolled onto his back. "Let's try and get some rest."

I was really relaxed now, almost euphoric. Getting comfortable, I laid my head on his chest and draped my arm across his stomach. After closing my eyes, I eventually drifted off.

My nails tore into the wallpaper as Mr. X dragged me down the hall. I let out another pain-riddled scream, despite knowing that no one could hear me. That knowledge had been proven when our neighbors hadn't come running to my earlier screams. Our houses were just too far apart.

I tried to kick my legs free, but Mr. X's grip was too strong, and his steps didn't slow. I was so focused on trying to grab a hold of anything that came into reach that I didn't realize we were passing Shayla's body until I felt something wet seep into the back of my clothes. At the sight of her pink hair, my throat closed, and I began choking on my sobs. I grabbed her hand as it came into reach, desperately hoping to find some flicker of life still left in her. When both of our eyes were level with each other, I saw hers were open and vacant.

“No!” ripped out of me. “Shayla!” I wailed, squeezing her hand as Mr. X continued to pull me away from her and into my bedroom.

“Shayla!” I screamed as I shot up from where I was lying.

Hands cupped my cheeks, and I was forced to meet Colt’s eyes. “Shh, you’re okay.”

I grasped his wrists. “I couldn’t save her.” Tears poured down my cheeks. “I couldn’t get out.”

“It’s not your fault, Shiloh,” Colt said before pulling me against his chest and hugging me.

“I couldn’t escape. He wouldn’t let me,” I cried into his chest.

His arms tightened around me. “You did. You got out. You’re safe.”

A second set of hands grabbed me by the hips from behind, making me jump. “It’s just me, Shi,” I heard Creed say as his thumbs rubbed small circles on my lower back. “This one was bad.” Creed let out a curse. “Her whole body is shaking.”

“Given what happened yesterday—” Colt started to say but was interrupted by three pounding knocks. Startled, I lurched closer to Colt until I was straddling his lap and burying my face in his bare shoulder.

Colt’s arms tightened around me. “It’s okay. Someone knocked on the front door. That’s all.”

The bed shook a little. “I’ll go answer it. I have a feeling it’s Keelan and Knox,” Creed said. I listened to the sounds of his footsteps getting further and further away as he headed for the front door.

I flattened my palms on Colt’s chest. His skin was warm and smooth. I moved them down and around his sides. His body went taut as I ran them up his back.

“Not that I’m complaining that you’re touching me, but what are you doing, babe?”

“Making sure you’re real,” I whispered. “They feel so real. It’s getting harder to tell where they end and reality begins.”

Colt ran a hand down the back of my head. “Your nightmares?”

I nodded against his shoulder. “I wish I didn’t have to sleep.”

“Everything okay?” I heard Keelan say softly. There was movement in

my room, followed by the left side of the bed dipping.

“Bad nightmare,” Colt said.

“We could hear her screaming from our house,” Knox grumbled.

“This one was different,” Creed said from somewhere in the room. “It seemed more violent.”

“That’s how it seemed this morning at the hospital,” Keelan said.

“Think Jacob attacking her triggered something?” Knox asked.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Colt said.

“You’re talking as if I’m not here.” I let out a shaky breath. “I feel like a freak at the circus.”

“I’d pay to see your act,” Keelan said and the tightness in my chest eased a little.

I pulled my face away from Colt’s neck and I met his worried eyes. Colt’s hands went to my cheeks and his thumbs wiped away my tears. “I’m sorry we were talking about you, but at least it got you to stop shaking.”

That was true. My mind drifted to how scared I’d felt and acted. My nightmares were getting worse. My eyes dropped to Colt’s chest. It was wet and striped with streams of my tears.

I couldn’t meet his eyes. “I’m—”

“Don’t,” Knox snapped, interrupting me. I glanced toward my bedroom door. He was leaning against the frame, frowning. “Stop apologizing for something that isn’t your fault.”

Colt tucked my hair behind my ear. “I agree with Knox. Stop apologizing.”

“I know it’s not my fault,” I snapped and then grimaced. “I just...” If I was being honest, I was still worried they’d get sick of dealing with me, even though they had repeatedly proven that they weren’t going to run for the hills. I had no reason not to believe them, but something was holding me back. It was me. I was holding me back. “How do you suggest I act right now? Pretend I didn’t just wake up screaming?”

“No!” they all said at the same time.

I looked around at all of them. Keelan was lying where Creed had been sleeping and he had certainly made himself comfortable in my bed, with his long legs crossed at the ankles and his hands laced behind his head, displaying the tattoos covering the undersides of his arms. I looked for Creed next. He was leaning against my dresser, with his arms crossed over his bare chest. His basketball shorts hung low, showing off the V of his hips. My

mind drifted to what he, Colt, and I had done earlier—how they had touched me. It took effort to tear my gaze away. I moved my eyes up to meet Creed's and saw that he was smirking at me. With hot cheeks I looked back at Colt and saw that he was grinning. I didn't dare look at Knox or Keelan. I had a feeling everyone had caught me ogling Creed. I cleared my throat. "Is anyone hungry?" I asked as I climbed off of Colt and the bed. Once I was standing, I was reminded that I was only wearing a shirt and underwear. I tugged on the hem of my shirt. "I need pants."

"Oh, don't feel the need to put your clothes on because we're here," Keelan said, reciting what I had told him the first time I'd had breakfast at their house. Colt and Creed both chuckled and Knox shook his head, but I could tell he was fighting not to smile.

I was positive I was flushed. I still attempted to keep my cool and recited what he had responded with that morning: "Thanks for the permission to be naked, Keelan."

Their smiles dropped and the room went very quiet for a moment. Then Keelan jumped to his feet and rounded my bed, heading for the door. "I think we should order in."

Colt also stood from my bed. "That's a good idea. Want to eat at our place, babe?"

"Sure," I said distractedly. The sound of my dresser drawer being closed pulled my attention. Creed tossed me a pair of loose pajama shorts with baby cartoon Avengers on them before scooping up Colt's and his shirts off the top of my dresser. He tossed one shirt to Colt and they put them on before dashing out of my room, following Keelan.

I watched them pass Knox, who stepped aside to let them leave, as I pulled on my shorts. I was tying the drawstrings as I walked toward the door.

"Pretending you don't have nightmares isn't the answer," Knox said, stepping in my way. "It might help you to talk about them."

I looked up, meeting his intense brown eyes. "My nightmares are mostly of the night my family was murdered. I don't even like to think about that night, let alone talk about it."

"Just because you don't want to think about that night doesn't mean it didn't happen," he said bluntly.

That had been the last thing my psychiatrist had said before I'd closed my computer on her and never attended therapy again. Alaska didn't provide a huge selection of psychiatrists to choose from and none of them had

experience helping people with my type of trauma. Which was why all my sessions had been via video chat.

“It sounds like your nightmares are a result of what you’re refusing to face,” Knox said. “We all have to face our pain, Shiloh. If you don’t, you won’t find a way to accept it and you’ll never be able to move on.”

His words were like a punch to my gut and he left me standing there, stunned.

LAST NIGHT, AFTER DINNER AT THE GUYS', I WENT HOME AND WATCHED THE Food Network all night. Colt and Creed had offered to spend the night. I'd turned them down. They had been up all night when I'd been in the hospital and had gotten broken sleep because of me yesterday. They deserved a good night's rest.

Despite missing school the previous day, Friday at school was thankfully uneventful. Sure, I got dirty looks from Cassy and her posse, but since I wasn't cornered in the locker room or tossed in the school's pool, I was going to call it a good day.

As soon as the final bell rang, Isabelle, Ethan's girlfriend, and I met in the parking lot. We were going to have a girls' afternoon to prepare for Ethan's party tonight.

"How are you doing?" Isabelle asked as we climbed into my 4Runner. "Ethan told me what happened with that guy who attacked you."

"I—I'm alright," I said as I turned on the car.

"You don't sound so sure," she said, peeking at me before looking out her window. "I'd be a mess."

"I think I'm still processing it," I said and pulled out of the school's parking lot. "I was terrified at the time. I was angry afterward. Now, I don't know how to feel." The truth was that I was disturbingly unfazed.

She tucked her long, dirty-blond hair behind her ear. "That's understandable. If you begin to feel overwhelmed while we're out, don't hesitate to tell me and we'll go home, okay?"

Finally, I thought. I'd found a girl who could be a good friend. Logan would be happy. "Thank you for that. I'm really happy to be out, though. I

love hanging out with the guys, but I've desperately needed some girl time."

She smiled. "Same. I swear I've been spending all my time with Ethan."

"What about your other girlfriends? They haven't wanted to hang out?" I asked. I had seen Isabelle hanging around two other girls at school. I thought their names were Gina and Paige. Both were quiet and kept to themselves.

Isabelle didn't answer right away, and I caught her sad expression before she turned her head to look out the side window. "They don't like Ethan. They think he's a player and don't understand why I would want to date him. It doesn't help that he's popular, either."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Gina and Paige hate the popular crowd at our school. I mean, you know how bad Cassy and her friends are."

I nodded. Yes, I did.

"I'm not proud to say that I used to judge Ethan and his friends because they hang in the same social circles. That's why when Ethan first tried talking to me, I shot him down right away. I disliked him without truly knowing him. Seeing him trying to cover up his hurt puppy-dog look made me feel disappointed in myself. I guess you could say it was an eye-opening moment. So when he tried talking to me again, I listened."

"I'm glad you did, because I can confidently say that Ethan is crazy about you."

The joy that filled her eyes was genuine. "This place we're going to does hair, too. What are your thoughts on adding that to the agenda? I think I want to take the plunge and dye my hair."

She had told me she had been thinking about dyeing it pink. I glanced at my dark roots in the rearview mirror. "Sure."

"Yes!" she exclaimed and pointed at the shopping center I needed to pull into. "Now I'm more excited than nervous."

"You're nervous?" I asked as I pulled in and parked in front of Mystic Beauty Salon.

"I'm a little nervous about the party," she replied. "I've never been to one unless you count birthday parties."

"Same." Was I nervous? Not really. I was kind of looking forward to it. Shayla had been to more parties than I could count. She'd even risked the wrath of our parents every time.

We walked into the Mystic Beauty and upbeat music greeted us. The salon was decorated in bright white and gold.

“How can I help you?” a lady wearing a black apron over all black clothes asked from behind a tall, white marble counter.

“We’re here to see my cousin Maranda,” Isabelle said.

Not a moment later, a slightly older version of Isabelle came out of a door behind the desk. She and Isabelle had the same dirty-blonde hair and blue eyes.

“Hey, Izzy,” the older version of Isabelle greeted her. She was also wearing a black apron over black clothes. Her hair was styled flawlessly, and her red nails had geometric designs on them.

“We’re here,” Isabelle said and gestured to me. “This is my new friend Shiloh. We’re going to get our hair done, too, if that’s alright?”

“Nice to meet you, Shiloh,” Maranda said with a smile. “Adding hair to the schedule is no problem. I’m training a new girl, so I have extra help today.” She tilted her head to the back. “Let’s go get started.”

Isabelle and I followed her further into the salon and Maranda had us sit in two twirling leather chairs in front of brightly lit vanities. Not a second later, another black-apron-wearing girl with a pixie cut showed up and stood next to Maranda.

“This is Lexi,” Maranda introduced her and then explained to Lexi what we were here for.

Lexi smiled at us and moved to stand behind Isabelle’s chair.

Maranda moved behind mine and ran her fingers through my long lilac hair. “Izzy said we were doing color today?”

Before I could answer, Isabelle said, “Are you going to touch up your roots or do you want to do something totally different?”

I pulled on a strand of my hair. Was it time for a change? Shayla never stayed with the same hair color very long. “I think I might want to do something different. What color do you suggest?”

Isabelle grinned as she looked over my hair.

“What about cherry red?” Maranda suggested as she continued to play with my hair. “You have the perfect complexion for it.”

“Ooh, I like that,” Isabelle said, nodding.

I tried to imagine what I’d look like and shrugged. “Alright. Red it is.”

I couldn't stop looking at my hair in the mirror as I applied my makeup. It was so different, and I loved it.

My afternoon with Isabelle had been uplifting. We'd both talked and laughed a lot as we'd gotten to know each other. Because we both had long and thick hair, we hadn't been able to stop giggling at all the foils that we'd had on our heads as we'd gotten our nails worked on. I'd chosen a matte black for my nails because my new hair had been giving me a dark, edgy vibe. I'd wanted to be brave and embrace it. Isabelle had had her nails painted neon green with black stars, which surprisingly matched her hair. Lexi had made the suggestion that Isabelle go with neon green on the top and black on the very bottom layer instead of dyeing it all pink. Isabelle had been all for it and I'd liked the idea of green and black a lot more than pink.

After our hair and nails had been done, we'd had just enough time to run across the street to the mall to find something to wear for tonight. Isabelle had found an outfit right away. I, on the other hand, had struggled for a little bit. I'd kept eyeing this black dress, but I'd kept talking myself out of even touching it. The style was so different from what I normally wore. Then Isabelle had caught me looking at it.

She had grabbed the dress off the rack and put it in my hand. "Go try it on," she had said with a gentle nudge toward the dressing room. I'd put it on, and the moment I'd stepped out of the dressing room, her mouth had fallen open. "Oh wow! You look like Jessica Rabbit and a vampire had a baby."

"Is that a good thing?" I'd asked, laughing.

She had nodded. "You look sexy."

"Sexy," I had repeated as I'd smoothed my hands down the front of the skintight, black fabric.

Isabelle had frowned. "Have you ever tried to look sexy before?"

I'd shaken my head.

Sure, I bought superhero lingerie. I had never bought it with the intention of feeling sexy—which I was sure a lot of women did, and that was fantastic. For one, I loved superheroes and to have something that symbolized that brought me a little bit of joy. And two, it had been my first step to living more bravely. Yes, my eccentric lingerie was hidden under my clothes, but I had to start somewhere.

"I've never tried to be sexy. To be honest, I wouldn't know where to begin," I had admitted to her.

Isabelle had stepped closer and turned me toward the mirror in the

dressing room. “How does this dress make you feel? Because that’s what really matters. Not what you’re trying to be, but how you feel in it.”

Like I’ve missed out on so much. “Confident.” The corner of my mouth had tugged up. “Sexy.”

Isabelle had smiled, too. “I think you found what you’re wearing tonight.”

After finishing the last touches to my makeup, I went to stand before my full-length mirror in my closet. I looked over my new black dress, which was long-sleeved. The neckline went all the way to my throat, but its length cut off mid-thigh. Because the fabric was form-fitting, I couldn’t wear anything underneath. I had never gone without underwear before. My mother would have killed me and my sister would have high-fived me if they had still been here.

Staring at myself in the mirror, I took in my new hair, then my makeup. I went with dark colors that made my gray eyes pop and chose a red lipstick. I really was going all in with this new look. At least for tonight. My gaze roamed down to my black pumps, which had thick ankle straps that covered my scars perfectly. Everything about my appearance made me nervous, yet I found it exciting at the same time.

I grabbed my anklet tracker and put it around my wrist. I had to punch a new hole in the band so it wouldn’t fall off. I tucked it under my sleeve and was pleased it didn’t look too bulky. The tracker had the same shape as a Fitbit. If I was lucky, people would think that was what it was if it happened to slip out from under my sleeve.

Colt and Creed had said they would come and get me when it was time to go. I looked at the time. I was ready with ten minutes to spare. Instead of fidgeting at home, I figured I could hang out with Knox and Keelan as I waited.

I knocked on their front door before letting myself in. “It’s me!” I said loudly as I shut the door behind me.

Knox walked out of the kitchen, followed by Keelan. The moment they saw me, they froze.

“Damn,” Keelan drawled as his eyes raked over all of me.

Knox folded his arms across his chest. “You changed your hair.” His tone sounded like he was irritated.

“I did.” I pulled on a red, curled strand. “Do you like it?”

Knox didn’t respond. Instead, he continued to stare at me, his hard gaze

making a slow descent from my head to my pumps.

“Red is his favorite color,” Keelan said with a mischievous grin and put his hand on Knox’s shoulder. “That’s why his Camaro’s red.”

Knox shrugged off his brother’s hand and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Keelan’s grin didn’t waver as he watched his brother walk away.

“I guess he doesn’t like it,” I mumbled. Why did I feel so disappointed by that? I didn’t dye my hair for him. I did it for me.

“Quite the opposite, baby girl.” Keelan made his way over to me. “I bet he’s in there trying to think of reasons not to.”

I frowned. “What?”

He shrugged. “Boys can be stupid sometimes.”

Yeah, that still didn’t make any sense. “Boys? Knox is twenty-five.”

“Fine. Men can be stupid sometimes.” He took the strand of hair I was pulling on and curled it around his finger. “Especially when it comes to someone so beautiful and sweet.”

“You think I look beautiful?”

Tugging on my hair gently, he said, “I think you look fucking stunning.” He put his other hand on my hip and slid it to my lower back. “And I always think you look beautiful.”

It was shameful how I reacted. My pulse started racing and I had to fight the urge to arch against him, desperately wanting him to touch more of me.

His gaze dropped to my mouth. “I’m almost tempted to use ‘it’s my birthday’ as a way to guilt you into spending the evening with me instead of going to Ethan’s lame party.”

The evening, I repeated in my head. I cleared my throat. “Your birthday is tomorrow.” I was proud of how calm and unaffected my voice came out.

He pouted. “I’m only going to turn twenty-three once. I need to make the most of it.”

I smiled. “Any age you turn will be the only time.”

A throat cleared behind Keelan and guilt hit me like an arrow to the gut. Keelan’s shoulders slumped and he turned a little, revealing Colt and Creed standing behind him, glaring. They both looked gorgeous. Colt was wearing a dark blue button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled almost to his elbows and dark jeans. Creed was also wearing dark blue jeans, but with a skintight black T-shirt.

Creed reached for me. “Quit hogging our girlfriend,” he grumbled as he

grabbed my wrist and pulled me toward him.

Keelan let me go and stared at Creed with his brows raised. "If anyone is hogging her attention, that would be the two of you."

Creed's arm wrapped around my waist and held me against him. "You'll be getting plenty of Shi's attention tomorrow. Tonight, she's ours."

I was still held up on the girlfriend comment, but said, "I kind of feel like a toy you all are bickering over."

"We're not bickering. We have an agreement," Creed said.

"An agreement?" I repeated.

Colt grabbed my hand. "That's a discussion we can save for later. Let's get going." Pulling me out of Creed's arms, he steered me toward the door.

"Don't wait up," Creed said over his shoulder as he followed us out of the house.

Colt led me to the passenger side of Creed's black truck and then spun around. His eyes bounced all over me. "You look..." He rubbed the back of his neck, unable to take his eyes off me. "Different."

Just different?

I felt Creed come up behind before his hands smoothed over my hips. "I think what he's trying to say is, you look smokin' hot."

Colt nodded.

Creed's hands squeezed my hips a little. "You're really bringing out the caveman in me. I might have to kick someone's ass if they look at you for too long."

Creed's words seemed to break Colt's trance and he stared past me to look at his brother. "Maybe we shouldn't go."

"That thought had crossed my mind. I'd hate to ruin Ethan's party with a fight," Creed said.

Colt nodded again and folded his arms over his chest. "Fuck Ethan."

"I agree, fuck Ethan," Creed repeated.

"Cheese and rice, not this again," I snapped, moving toward the truck. I went to open the door to the backseat when I heard the sound of the lock clicking into place. I spun around, glaring. They both held confident smirks, as if they were tickled they'd outsmarted me. I put my hands on my hips. "You have two options, boys. Either you come with me to the party or you stay home and I'll go to the party all by myself."

Their smirks dropped. "Normally Knox is on the receiving end of that look," Creed grumbled.

“It’s funnier when it happens to him,” Colt said.

Creed looked at his twin. “Think it’s the red hair?”

Colt shrugged. “Redheads have been known to have fiery attitudes.”

I’d show them fiery. “I guess I’m going to the party alone.” I started walking away. “I wonder what drinking game Ethan wants me to play. I hope I don’t get too drunk. Things like inhibitions tend to go out the window when that happens.”

Creed caught me by my waist and put his lips to my ear. “That was manipulative.”

“Yet highly effective,” Colt grumbled and waved flippantly toward the truck. “Unlock it, Creed.”

I bit my lip to hold back a smile as we climbed into Creed’s truck and headed to Ethan’s.

ETHAN LIVED IN A GATED, UPSCALE NEIGHBORHOOD WITH BIG HOUSES. THE long driveway was already filled with cars and we had to park next to the curb in the street. We all climbed out and I stared up at the huge, two-story, mid-century modern house that had music blaring from it.

“Impressed?” Colt asked when he caught me staring. I glanced at him. He looked from me to Ethan’s house. “Ethan’s dad owns a nightclub downtown and his mom is the weatherwoman for Channel Six.”

“No. Big houses have many faults.” Like if you scream, no one will hear you. My hands clenched into fists at my sides and I chastised myself for letting my thoughts go there.

“You grew up in a big house like this, right?” Creed asked, coming to stand next to us.

I nodded. “A red brick Victorian. I own it now.”

Their heads whipped in my direction. “You own it?” Colt asked.

“I didn’t have time to grab a lot or have the opportunity to go through any of my family’s belongings before I was put into WITSEC. I just took a few mementos and a bag of clothes. Logan suggested I pay to have someone pack everything up and put it in storage so I can sell the house, but I haven’t been able to bring myself to do it.”

“It took us a while to box up our dad’s stuff after he died,” Colt said. “Once we did and we were left standing in an empty bedroom none of us wanted, we made the decision to sell the house. The house we have now was something we all picked out together in order to move on.”

I put my hand in his. “I’m glad you did or else I wouldn’t have met any of you.”

“We would have seen you at school and we’d still be standing right here right now,” Creed said.

“We would have had to fight off the other guys trying to get your attention, but we would have gotten to you eventually,” Colt said.

I scoffed. “What other guys?”

The corner of Colt’s mouth lifted. “The moment I saw you, babe, I wanted you, and I made sure all the guys at our school knew it, too.”

I gaped. “What?”

“Why do you think I insisted on showing you around school the first day?” he asked.

My mouth dropped open even further. “I thought you were being nice.”

He winced. “I was. I wanted to get to know you more and I didn’t want other guys interrupting that.”

Creed chuckled. “He gave this *off-limits* glare to every guy who looked at you that first week.” He squeezed Colt’s shoulder. “Good job, bro.”

“I feel like I should be mad.” I sighed. “However, I find your possessiveness very attractive.”

“Thanks, babe,” Colt said and gave me a quick kiss on the lips.

“Alright, let’s get this over with,” Creed grumbled, as if he wanted to be anywhere but here, and we headed up to the house.

We walked right in through the front door. Just inside was a large foyer with a grand staircase that led upstairs. There were people everywhere. Colt hadn’t let go of my hand and was taking the lead as we walked through the foyer into a large open space that consisted of a living room, dining room, and kitchen. The entire far wall was floor-to-ceiling windows and a huge folding glass door that was open. Through the bodies of people standing around a few kegs on the back patio, I could see a giant pool.

Creed frowned at a group of guys staring at us, or more specifically me, as we walked by. “I’m going to get in a fight.”

I grabbed his hand, too, and pulled him along.

“Shiloh!” I heard Isabelle call. I searched for her and spotted her and Ethan making their way toward us from the large, drool-worthy kitchen. With a big smile, Isabelle hugged me. Stunned, it took me a second to hug her back. “You look amazing,” she gushed as she pulled away.

I beamed. “So do you.” She was wearing black shorts with a white, shimmering, sequined tank that really made her straight neon green hair pop.

I glanced at Ethan and found him already staring at me. “You do look like

a vampire and Jessica Rabbit had a baby.”

Isabelle grinned at Ethan. “Right? I told you.”

Ethan nodded and I saw a mischievous glint spark in his eyes. “Are you ready to play a drinking game?”

Creed cursed. “We just walked through the door.”

Ethan lifted his arms out at his sides, looking around at everyone. “The whole point of a party is to party.”

Isabelle shook her head. “There’s no point in arguing. He’s been brainstorming the best drinking game to play with Shiloh for days.”

“A bet is a bet and Shi lost,” Ethan said. “Are you sure you don’t want to play, baby?”

Isabelle shook her head again. “There’s no way I’d win.” She winced and looked at me. “Prepare yourself.”

Gee, that’s reassuring.

Ethan laughed and waved for us to follow him back into the kitchen.

“What game did you end up choosing?” Colt asked.

“You can’t play. First-timers only,” Ethan said as he grabbed a bunch of shot glasses from a cabinet.

We all watched as Ethan placed four shot glasses in front of me on the kitchen island and four in front of himself. He began filling each shot glass in front of me with a different liquor. Jim Beam, Jose Cuervo, Fireball, and Bacardi 151. Then he did the same with his four shot glasses in the same order. I was acquainted with each of the spirits he’d used and all of them tasted terrible. That was a given, I found, with most alcohol. But I never drank it for its taste. If I had to pick a poison, it would be whiskey. It had a preferable burn when going down. Out of the selection Ethan had chosen, the Bacardi almost had me cringing. Rum and I didn’t get along.

Ethan rubbed his hands together with evil glee. “Here’s how we play—”

“Shit, man, you’re going to get her trashed with one game,” Creed grumbled.

I almost snickered. It’d take more than four shots to do that. I wasn’t going to say that out loud, though. Not until I knew how this game was played.

“The deal was for one drinking game. I had to make it count,” Ethan argued. “Anyway, here’s how we do this...we’re each going to take a shot at the same time. The first person to make the slightest cringe loses. If neither of us reacts to the first shot we move to the next one, then so on and so forth.”

“What do I get when I beat you?” I asked.

“I knew you would say that,” Ethan said with a grin. “If I win, you have to play another drinking game.”

“Why am I getting the impression that you’re trying to get me drunk?”

“I’m not. I think it would be good for you to let loose a little,” he said. “As your friend, I think you deserve to have some fun for once.”

That was very sweet of him.

“Fine.” I looked to Isabelle. “What should I make him do if I win?”

She grinned and tapped her chin with her finger. “What do you think of the music playing?” she asked me.

It was good. Seemed like it was mostly rock. “You want to change it?”

“I think we should be allowed to DJ and dance later to some of our favorites. I was thinking some Taylor, Sia, Billie, and maybe even some Harry,” she said, her grin turning downright evil. Her and Ethan were meant for each other.

I looked to Ethan. “I like that. If I win, Isabelle and I get to play DJ later.”

Ethan held a cocky smirk that I was going to enjoy removing from his face. “Deal.” He lifted the shot glass filled with Jim Beam and held it up.

I picked up my Jim Beam shot glass and clanked it with his. Without losing eye contact, we threw back our shots at the same time. I didn’t so much as blink as it scorched everything it touched on its way down my throat.

Ethan also was unfazed. “Impressive for someone who’s never been to a party.”

I scooped up my next shot glass, filled with Jose. “This is indeed my first party. However, this isn’t my first time doing shots.”

Colt and Creed chuckled next to me and Isabelle giggled. Ethan’s cocky smirk dropped just a smidge, but it was still satisfying to see.

Ethan clanked his shot glass with mine and we downed the Jose. I wasn’t a fan of tequila and it took effort to keep it from showing. Ethan hadn’t reacted to the shot, either. Colt, Creed, and Isabelle cheered, drawing the attention of others.

By the time we both set our empty shot glasses down, Ethan wasn’t smirking any longer.

Isabelle pulled out her phone from her back pocket. “I’m going to make a playlist for our DJ session.”

That made us laugh and Ethan pouted a little. “You’re supposed to be on

my side,” he said to her.

“I’ll make it up to you later,” she said before putting her mouth to his ear and whispering something to him.

Ethan’s smile grew bigger and bigger as he listened to whatever she was telling him. I couldn’t help but watch them—their intimacy and how comfortable they were with each other. I couldn’t stop myself from comparing my relationship with Colt and Creed to theirs. Mine was so different. Not bad. Just different. But I wanted that intimacy and connection with Colt and Creed. Was it sex that brought Isabelle and Ethan that close? Was I ready to take that step with Colt and Creed? *I think I am.*

A hand touched my back. “You alright?” Colt whispered in my ear.

I nodded. “Yeah, I was just thinking,” I whispered back.

“About?” he asked.

I smiled. “I’ll tell you later.”

“Okay,” Ethan said, picking up the Fireball shot. “You ready?”

I scooped up my shot. We clanked our glasses and threw them back. Fireball was whiskey, so it wasn’t that bad. Ethan’s eyes watered a little, but other than that he had no reaction. We both looked down at the last shot. Bacardi 151. *Cheese and rice.* I had to give myself a mental pep talk before picking up the shot. I’d endured worse. I’d tasted worse. *I will not react. I will not react.*

Everyone was quiet as they watched us tap our glasses together and take the shots. My eyes burned and the alcohol tasted foul as it rolled over my tongue, but I held my composure.

Ethan coughed and his face scrunched up. Isabelle, Colt, and Creed cheered, claiming me as the winner. I let out a breath and gagged. “That was terrible. I need something to get rid of the taste in my mouth,” I begged the guys.

“Want a beer or a soda?” Colt asked.

“Beer, please,” I said.

Smiling, Colt put a hand on Ethan’s slumped shoulder. “You were bound to lose at something one of these days. Come on, let’s go get a beer.”

Ethan threw an arm over Isabelle’s shoulders and the three of them headed out onto the back patio.

Creed’s arm wrapped around me and his hand flattened on my lower stomach, pulling me against him. I leaned back against his chest and tilted my head so I could look up at him. He was frowning toward the living room. I

looked in that direction and saw Gabe standing with some of his teammates from the baseball team. He was smirking at Creed. As if feeling me staring at him, Gabe's gaze shifted to me and his eyes turned predatory as they slid down my body. I knew it wasn't because he found me attractive. It was to taunt Creed.

I caught sight of Cassy sitting with Amber on the couch a few feet away from her cousin, Gabe. She was watching Creed's unease with disturbing smugness.

The need to slap that smugness off her face bubbled inside me. I spun to face Creed. "Will you indulge my need to be petty?"

He stared down at me with an unsure look. "What?"

My cheeks warmed, but I could blame it on the alcohol. "Will you kiss me?"

His brows shot up before his mouth stretched into a smile. "Alright," he said, leaning close.

I put my fingers on his mouth, stopping him. "Kiss me like you've never kissed her."

He pulled my hand away. "I've never kissed her like I've kissed you." He slid his hand behind my neck, pulling me even closer until my head was tilted back and his lips hovered over mine. "She was just to pass the time. When I'm with you, time doesn't exist. There's just you."

Cassy and everything around us ceased to exist. I wanted to smile or gush with happiness, but I kept my cool. "Good." I pushed up on my tiptoes and pressed my lips to his. I got to have my way with him until my tongue touched his. Then he took over, kissing the crap out of me. His tongue was skilled and the way it stroked mine made my thoughts wander to the memory of when he'd had it between my legs.

My head was a little dizzy when he eventually pulled away. Staring down at me, he whispered, "You're flushed."

I cleared my throat. "It's the alcohol."

He huffed a laugh. "Sure it is."

The moment was ruined when I looked over at Cassy. She was standing, hands fisted at her sides, and by her expression, she was fuming. I gave her the same smug look she had given Creed and that sent her stomping away.

"I should encourage you not to stoop to her level," Creed said as he pressed his lips just below my ear.

I shivered. "I blame you."

He pulled away. “Me?”

I smiled up at him. “You called me your girlfriend.”

He smiled down at me. “Caught that, did you?”

“You know, we haven’t discussed what we are—you, me, and Colt. Or how this relationship works.”

He frowned a little. “I thought it was obvious.”

“Maybe it is.” I stepped back, needing a little space. “I’ve never done this before, let alone with two people.”

A red plastic cup appeared in front of me. Colt was standing next to us. “If that’s what you need, babe, we can talk about it. Later, though.”

“That’s fine.” I took the cup from him. “You should know that since you’ve already called me your girlfriend, I’ve claimed the title and there are no take-backs.”

They both smiled.

“I HAVE TO PEE!” ISABELLE SHOUTED OVER THE MUSIC.

Our DJ session, which was just us connecting Isabelle’s phone to the sound system, was a hit. A bunch of girls had started dancing in the backyard next to Ethan’s giant pool. Of course, once a bunch of girls started dancing, guys were quick to follow. Isabelle had pulled me into the crowd of gyrating bodies and that was where we’d stayed, having a blast drinking beer and dancing. It was then that I understood the hype behind Shayla’s desire to sneak out to these.

“Do you want me to go with you?” I shouted back. “It isn’t safe to go alone.”

She pointed to Ethan, who was standing with Colt, Creed, and a few of their friends by the kegs, watching over us as they talked. “Ethan!” she called out to him. He walked away from his friends without hesitation and met her as she squeezed out of the dancing crowd. He leaned his head close to listen to her, nodded, and wrapped his arm around her as they went inside.

I went back to dancing alone, not that it felt like it. There were so many bodies swaying around me. It was hot, but I didn’t care. I was buzzed from the alcohol and I was high on endorphins from the dancing.

Moving to the beat of the music, I lifted my arms in the air and closed my eyes. I let myself get lost in the moment. I was so relaxed, I didn’t jump when fingers brushed my spine before they trailed down and around to my hip. A body molded itself to my back side and matched the sway of my hips, followed by a second hand flattening on my stomach. I didn’t have to look to know it was Creed. I just knew. I recognized his touch—the feel of him against me. I leaned into him, pressing my back to his chest and hooking an

arm around the back of his neck.

We danced, moving as one until another body pressed to my front. I had no doubt it was Colt. As soon as he pressed his pelvis to mine, I dropped my other arm and hooked it around his neck, locking the three of us together.

I slowly opened my eyes, finding Colt's hooded. One of his hands went to my free hip while his other went to cup my face. The three of us were so close, bumping and grinding. The temperature in the room rose drastically. My entire body felt flushed. My skin tingled under their fingertips.

Colt's eyes locked with mine. His face inched closer and closer, and when I couldn't handle the anticipation any longer, I pulled him the rest of the way by the back of his neck. His lips touched mine, gently at first. I felt the vibration of his groan and he leaned into me, pushing my body firmly against Creed's. My fingers dug into Creed's neck as Colt claimed my mouth as if he were starved and couldn't get enough of me.

I arched myself between them, needing more, wanting more. Creed's fingers dug into me through the fabric of my dress and when I felt him harden, I gasped, breaking away from Colt's mouth. I tilted my head back and to the side to look at Creed. His eyes were also hooded. I pulled his head down and pressed my lips to his. I parted my lips, intending to deepen our kiss, but he was already ready for me and his tongue dominated my own.

Just as quickly as our kiss had started, it ended. Creed abruptly pulled away. He locked eyes with Colt. "It's time to go."

I glanced at Colt and saw him nod. Colt grabbed my hand and we followed Creed through the house. I stumbled a few times and laughed each time at my clumsiness. When I stumbled down the driveway, Colt scooped me up in his arms. I let out a squeal before giggling and wrapping my arms around his neck. Creed glanced back at us with a questioning look.

"She keeps falling over," Colt explained as he carried me.

"It's so hot," I whined. "Let's go swimming when we get home."

"You gonna go in your underwear this time?" Creed asked me with mirth in his eyes.

"I'm not wearing any underwear, but I bought a bathing suit," I said.

Colt stopped walking and set me on my wobbly feet. "Are you being serious?"

"Yes, I bought a suit to wear to Keelan's party tomorrow and this pretty white cover-up dress to wear over it."

Colt frowned. "I meant about not wearing underwear."

I just grinned and spun on my heels, intending to continue on to Creed's truck. Spinning was a dumb thing to do. My heels wobbled out from under me and I was on my way to the ground again.

Colt caught me by my waist, saving me.

Creed cursed and knelt before me. "You need to take off these shoes, Shi."

With Colt still holding onto me, I lifted one foot and touched the toe of my pump to Creed's chest with a giggle.

He shook his head and got to work unfastening the strap. As he pulled my shoe off my foot, his eyes traveled up my leg, paused for only a breath when they met the end of my dress, then jumped up to meet mine with his brows high, as if surprised. "You really aren't wearing any underwear."

Colt groaned in my ear.

"Creed!" I yanked my bare foot from his grasp to put it on the ground.

"I didn't think you were serious," Creed said, chuckling. "I have to say, I'm liking this naughty side of you."

"I'm not naughty," I protested.

"You left the house without your panties, Shi. Sounds like you've made some naughty decisions today," Creed teased.

Instead of getting flustered, my tipsy brain thought it would be a good idea to add fuel to the fire. "I left my bra at home, too. I guess I really am a naughty girl."

Colt cursed. "You're killing me, babe."

Creed snorted and held out his hand. "Give me your other foot, Shi."

"Is this a ploy to look up my skirt again?" I asked.

"The first time was an accident, but no," he said. "There's no ploy. I just want to get you out of your shoes before you break something."

I offered him my other foot and he was a gentleman as he removed my pump. Once both of my bare feet were planted on the ground, Colt let me go. Creed stood with my heels in his hand. He held them out to Colt. "I'll carry her the rest of the way."

Colt took my pumps and walked ahead of us. Creed easily scooped me into his arms and carried me to his truck, where Colt had the door open for me to climb in. As soon as we pulled away from Ethan's and I relaxed in the dark backseat, my eyes began to feel heavy. I tried to keep them open, but at some point, I must have drifted. The next thing I knew, we were home and Creed was scooping me out of the truck.

“I don’t want to go home,” I mumbled as I fought to keep my eyes open. “I don’t want to sleep.”

“Want to stay over at our place?” Creed asked.

I snuggled my head against his shoulder. “Okay.”

I was in and out of consciousness as he carried me. I still heard them get their front door open and I felt the temperature change as we went inside.

“You guys are back early,” I heard Keelan say.

“It’s almost one in the morning,” Colt said, followed by the sound of keys being dropped into the bowl they had on a small table by the front door.

“Did she have a good time?” Keelan asked.

“She looked like she had fun,” Colt replied.

“She kicked Ethan’s ass in a drinking game,” Creed said. “She downed some hard liquor without batting an eye.”

“I’m not surprised,” I heard Knox say. “How many girls do you know who can drink straight from a bottle of Jack like they’ve been doing it for years?”

“You guys are talking about me again,” I mumbled.

Creed’s chest shook with silent laughter. “You’re supposed to be sleeping.”

“I am sleeping,” I mumbled, burying my face in his neck. Then I ripped my eyes open. “Wait!” I lift my head off his shoulder. “I don’t want to sleep.”

Creed hoisted me up in his arms and began walking toward the hall that led to their rooms. “Yes, you do. I’m putting both you and Colt to bed.”

I glanced at Colt and he looked really tired as he dragged his feet behind us. Knox and Keelan were standing in the living room, both only wearing shorts with their muscled chests on display, watching us leave.

“You’re both so pretty,” I said as I stared at their abs and the Vs at their hips.

Colt and Creed snorted.

Keelan grinned. “Thanks, baby girl.”

Knox actually smiled. “Sounds like she had a really good time tonight.”

“You’re drooling, Shi,” Creed teased.

I touched my mouth. “No, I’m not!”

They all chuckled, which made me roll my eyes. Keelan gave me a little wave. “Goodnight, Shiloh.”

I rested my head back on Creed’s shoulder. “Night.”

Colt followed us into Creed's room. Creed laid me on the bed and I curled up to go to sleep. Panic hit me and I shot up. "I don't want to sleep."

Colt plopped down on the bed next to me and began unbuttoning his shirt as he toed off his shoes. "We're going to bed, babe."

Creed opened his dresser and pulled out a navy T-shirt and handed it to me. "This might be more comfortable to sleep in."

I let out a groan and made my exhausted butt stand. The room started spinning and I was reminded that I was drunk.

Creed caught me as I started to tilt to the side.

I got my feet planted to steady me. "Thank you," I said and held the shirt out to him. "Can you hold this?"

He took it back with a confused look. I pulled one arm out of one sleeve, then, using my teeth, I pulled my other arm out of the other sleeve. I realized I had a problem when I found my arms stuck in the middle of the skintight dress. I let out a frustrated whine and looked at Creed. "I'm stuck."

He looked like he was trying not to laugh. "I can see that."

"Can you help me?" I asked.

"You're naked under that dress," Colt reminded me.

"I don't care." I really didn't. Not with how buzzed I was at the moment. All shyness and modesty had left the building. "Just help me get out of this."

Creed leaned down and grabbed the bottom of my dress. He got it up to my neck and I helped him get my head through the top. I sighed, happy to be free, as my hair fell to my bare shoulders.

Colt groaned before standing. He busied himself with taking off his shirt and unbuttoning his jeans. Creed's gaze took in every inch of me, unabashed. I let him look for a moment, liking the way it felt to be ogled and the heat that filled his eyes. "Do you want to give me the shirt back?" I asked him.

He shook his head slightly, unable to take his eyes off me. "Not really, no."

"Creed," Colt admonished.

"Fine," Creed grumbled and handed me the shirt.

I put it on and it covered me to mid-thigh. Stripped down to his boxers, Colt pulled back the black covers on Creed's bed and climbed in. He patted the mattress in the middle. "Come to bed."

He sounded so tired, I didn't have the heart to argue. I started to crawl toward the middle and Creed cursed behind me. On my hands and knees, I looked back at him. "What?"

“I think you’re trying to torture me,” he said as he raked his fingers through his hair. “You got that beautiful ass in the air. Have you already forgotten you don’t have any underwear on?”

I had forgotten. I was already somewhat turned on from how he’d looked at me naked. Taking in how affected he was now seeing my most private parts sent an achy pressure between my legs. “Oops.” I bit my lip as I sat down on my butt.

“It’s not funny, Shi,” Creed grumbled.

I tried not to smile and failed. “I’m sorry.” I didn’t sound very sincere even to my own ears.

Creed looked like he was fighting back a smile. “You’re a little tease when you’re drunk.”

I pulled on a curl, feeling a tiny bit shy. “What if I wasn’t teasing?”

Creed ran his hands down his face as he cursed again. “How am I supposed to say no to that?”

“You two are killing me,” Colt said and grabbed my hand. “Lay down, please.”

I frowned. “They have a name for what you’re doing.”

Creed erupted with laughter. His body shook so hard he was bent over with his hands on his knees.

Colt looked like he wanted to laugh, too. “Babe,” he said gently. “We are trying to be respectable boyfriends who do right by their girlfriend. Don’t make it harder on us, please.”

How could I argue with that? I slid under the blankets and Colt wrapped his arm around me.

I watched Creed as he stripped down to his boxer briefs with zero shame. “Like what you see?” he asked me as he tossed his clothes in his laundry basket.

I propped my head up on my hand. “It’s only fair. You looked your fill when I was naked.”

“Would you like me to take my boxers off so we can be even?” he asked.

Yes almost fell out of my mouth, but Colt’s arms tightened around me. “Keep your boxers on. Same goes for you, babe. Clothes stay on until you are sober.”

I sighed frustratedly.

Chuckling, Creed turned off the light. The bed dipped when he climbed in next to me.

“I have a question,” I said.

Creed scooted closer. “Of course you do.”

“Why can’t we do stuff because I’m drunk? I get that you don’t want to take advantage, but what if I want to?” I asked.

“And what stuff is that?” Creed asked and I swore I could hear the laughter in his voice.

Colt sighed. “Don’t encourage this.”

Creed chuckled. “Fine. Shi?”

“Yes?”

“Why can’t this *stuff* you speak of wait until you’re sober?” Creed asked. “Why take the risk of crossing a line?”

“That’s a very good point. I wish my hormones understood that right now,” I said.

Both of them snorted. Creed cupped my cheek. “Time for sleep.”

I bit my tongue to keep myself from arguing. I didn’t want to sleep.

MR. X PULLED ME OFF MY BEDROOM FLOOR BY MY HAIR. MY THROAT WAS SO sore from screaming, all I could do was grit my teeth through the pain. He was trying to get me on my bed. I couldn't let him do that.

The moment my feet were flat on the ground, I fought. I hit him, kicked him, and scratched him. He grunted a curse when I clawed his cheek.

His hand wrapped around my throat and squeezed. Digging my nails into his hand and wrist that held me, I tried to suck in what little air I could. His other hand appeared out of nowhere. I only got a glimpse of it before pain flared like lighting on the left side of my face. I flew backward. I braced to hit my bed, but it never came, and I continued to fall.

I lurched up into a sitting position with the feeling of falling still twisting up my stomach. I was breathing heavily, and my heart was pounding in my chest as if I'd just got done running.

A hand rubbed up and down my arm. "Bad dream?" Creed asked, his voice heavy with sleep.

I looked from him to Colt, who was sound asleep on my other side. "I'm fine. Go back to sleep," I whispered.

Creed didn't argue and was out within seconds. Doing my best not to wake them, I clambered out from between them and off the bed.

"Where you going, babe?" Colt mumbled.

"Bathroom. Go back to sleep," I whispered.

Colt also didn't argue and fell back to sleep before I made it to the door. After relieving myself, I washed my hands, took a look at myself in the mirror, and cringed. I had panda eyes. My dark lipstick had smeared to one cheek. Hovering over the sink, I splashed water on my face and did my best to wash most of my makeup off.

As I dried my face and hands, I noticed my hands were shaking. I squeezed them into fists, hoping that would make them stop. My knuckles turned white and my nails dug into my palms until it hurt. Physical pain always felt better than what I was feeling on the inside. I needed to go for a run.

Leaving the bathroom, I tried to remember where I'd last seen my wristlet. I had given it to Creed to hold before Isabelle and I had gone to dance. If I knew the guys, they would have put it in the bowl by the front door. Going into the dark living room, I turned on one of the free-standing lamps they had next to the couch. With light to see, I went over to the bowl, and sure enough my wristlet and keys were there. I pulled out my phone, hoping the time would tell me four or five in the morning. My phone lit up and showed me that it was barely two-thirty. This town's bars closed at two in the morning, meaning people were making their way home and some, who weren't smart, were probably trying to drive home drunk. Logan would kill me if he found out I'd gone running at this time of night. What if the guys woke to find me gone? I didn't want them to worry. But I couldn't go back to bed. Just the thought of doing that made my chest hurt. I needed to do something. Keep myself busy.

I looked around. If I was quiet, I could get ahead of what needed to be done for Keelan's birthday. I had asked Colt and Creed what to expect with Keelan's party after learning about it. They had told me that people were coming over, they'd all hang out by the pool, and Knox would grill some food. To which I'd replied, "That's it? What about decorations? Cake? Snacks? Drinks?" They had looked at each other, then Creed had responded with, "There will be beer." After I'd heard that, I had asked Keelan if I could contribute to his party. He'd seemed happy at the idea and given me the go-ahead to do whatever I wanted.

Relieved I had something to keep myself occupied with, I ran to my house to grab the supplies I'd purchased. Back in the guys' kitchen, I started with making the cake and getting it in the oven. Next, I made my mom's chocolate buttercream frosting and put it in the fridge to keep cold as the cake

cooled down after it was done baking. Knowing the cake needed time, I jumped to decorating. I refused to pause between tasks or to think of anything other than what had to be done. If I did, that might allow my mind to wander. I didn't even slow down when my hair started getting in the way. Using two pens I found, I twisted my hair up the best I could without a mirror. Small tendrils of red hair I still wasn't used to seeing escaped as I worked and I either tucked them behind my ears or swatted them out of my face.

I had chosen the colors of black, maroon, and metallic gold. I had managed to almost completely decorate the dining room. I went overboard with the amount of foil swirls, paper pom-poms, and streamers I taped to the ceiling, but it looked amazing. All that was missing were the balloons. The pump was too loud to blow them up.

I moved to decorate the kitchen next. I had just finished taping up one side of a Happy Birthday banner over the kitchen island when I heard, "Shiloh."

I jumped a little and glanced down. Knox was standing by the dining room table, staring up at me with tired eyes.

I winced. "Did I wake you?"

"What the hell are you doing standing on the counter?"

I looked down at the second half of the banner in my hand that needed to be taped up. "Decorating for Keelan's party."

"It's four in the morning."

I stepped to the opposite side of the island. "I couldn't sleep." As I reached toward the ceiling to hang the rest of the banner, the height made me a little dizzy and I wobbled a tiny bit. "Whoa."

Knox dashed for me. "Damn it, you're going to get yourself hurt." He put his hands up in front of him as if to catch me. "Get down, now."

"Not before I tape this up," I said, reaching for the ceiling again.

Knox cursed and grabbed my bare thighs just above my knees. The feel of his warm hands distracted me a little as I pushed up on my tiptoes and finished getting the banner hung.

Knox's fingers dug into my skin. I looked down at him. He was glaring at my left thigh where the hem of Creed's shirt ended, and his jaw was clenched.

I patted the top of his head. "What's the matter?"

His angry eyes jumped to meet mine. "You're not wearing any underwear."

Gasping, I jerked to get away from him so he couldn't see. He didn't release his tight hold on my legs and I ended up falling backward. Knox tried to catch me by the back of my calves. It didn't work. My legs bent and I ended up clamping his hands between the backs of my thighs and calves as I went down. My butt slammed onto the island, making a very loud thump. I caught myself with my hands before falling the rest of the way onto my back.

"Ow." I closed my eyes, wincing at my now-sore tailbone.

Knox's grip tightened to the point it toed the line of painful. My eyes shot open and I found him with his gaze glued between my slightly parted legs. Creed's shirt was bunched around my hips and my bottom half was on full display.

Mortified, I went to snap my legs shut. The intense look he held stopped me. His eyes had darkened, and his brow was pinched, giving him a mixed look of agony and want.

I couldn't tear my eyes from his, not when they made me feel...desired. Did he want me? Did I want him to want me? Yes, I did, and that terrified me. I brought my knees together and began pushing my shirt down to cover up. "Knox, I—"

"Well, this was not what I was expecting to see when woken by a loud noise," a voice I knew belonged to Keelan said.

Knox ripped his hands from my legs like they were on fire and moved back until he bumped into the fridge. We both looked toward the voice and found not only Keelan, but Colt and Creed standing in the dining room.

"Same here," Creed said, frowning at Knox.

Colt and Keelan didn't appear to be upset, but kept looking from me to Knox and back repeatedly.

"It's not what it looked like," Knox said.

"That doesn't make you sound guilty at all," Keelan said caustically.

"He's telling the truth. I fell and Knox tried to catch me." I pulled Creed's shirt down as far as it would go. "Unfortunately, I ended up exposing myself."

Creed let out a frustrated noise and Colt ran his fingers through his hair with a heavy sigh. Keelan was staring at Knox with a smug look that seemed to piss Knox off more.

"Well, actually, I ended up flashing him before I fell." I was blushing badly. I cleared my throat and looked at Knox. "In my defense, this all could have been avoided if you hadn't made a fuss over me hanging the banner."

He frowned at me. “You were going to fall.”

I rolled my eyes. “I was fine.”

“Accident or not, that doesn’t explain why he couldn’t remove his eyes from between your legs,” Creed snapped and scowled at Knox. “You said you didn’t want her. You said you didn’t want to have anything to do—”

“Creed,” Colt snapped, silencing his brother. I swore, whenever Colt hulked out, it always surprised everyone. It was such a drastic change from his kind demeanor. “It doesn’t matter,” Colt said, calmly.

Creed’s jaw clenched, but he didn’t argue.

Colt’s attention flicked to me and his angry expression softened. “What are you doing up?”

It took a moment for me to answer because I was still digesting that Knox had told them that he didn’t want me. I shouldn’t have been upset about that. I shouldn’t have because I was in a relationship with Colt and Creed. I shouldn’t have, yet my heart hurt. “I couldn’t sleep,” I said and tried to scoot to the edge of the island, but my bare butt was sticking to the granite.

“Are you stuck, baby girl?” Keelan asked with mirth in his eyes.

I didn’t find any of this funny. “Can you all close your eyes? I get that everyone has seen my vagina, but I would like to get off this counter with a little dignity.”

Keelan spun around. “If it makes you feel better, I haven’t seen it.”

“Fucking Christ,” Knox cursed and turned around.

The twins averted their eyes and I hopped off the island. “I’m down,” I announced and Keelan and Knox turned back around.

“Did you sleep at all?” Creed asked me.

I busied myself with collecting the plastic wrapping that the decorations had come in. “I don’t want to sleep.”

“That’s not what he asked,” Knox grumbled.

I shoved what I’d collected into the trash can with a little more force than necessary. “An hour.”

“You need to come back to bed and get some sleep,” Colt said.

“I said I don’t want to sleep!” I roared. Guilt hit me instantly and I squeezed my eyes shut. I couldn’t believe I had just exploded on them like that. “I’m sorry.” They were pushing the matter because they cared. They didn’t understand. I opened my eyes. They all seemed surprised, except Knox. He was watching me carefully with his intense brown eyes. “I’m sorry,” I said again.

“You want to tell us what that was about?” Creed asked.

I forced myself to appear calm even though panic was building in my chest. “I guess not sleeping is catching up with me. I’m sorry I yelled. You’re right. I should go back to bed.”

Colt made his way over and pulled me into his arms. “It’s alright. We’re just worried.”

“I don’t want that.” I pushed away from him. “Let me just put the cake in the fridge and I’ll come back to bed.”

“I can do it,” Keelan offered.

“It’s your birthday cake—”

“Just because it’s my birthday doesn’t mean my hands are broken,” Keelan interrupted me with a grin. “Go back to bed.”

I nodded tightly and let Colt usher me away.

“Shiloh,” Keelan said before we left. I glanced back at him and saw him looking at all the decorations. “It looks amazing in here. It means a lot that you did all of this.”

“I’m not done yet,” was all I could say before I walked with the twins back to Creed’s room.

I felt like I was outside my body watching as I forced myself to climb into the bed between them. I pretended to get comfortable with Creed snuggled up behind me and Colt holding my hand. I lay there with my eyes closed, faking sleep, fighting back my anxiety.

After they fell back to sleep, I couldn’t stand to lie there any longer. I snuck out of bed, grabbed my dress and heels off the floor, and left.

“Shiloh.”

I paused for a moment a few feet from the front door. Refusing to look back, I scooped my wristlet and keys out of the bowl. “I’m going home, Knox. I’ll see you later.” Not giving him a chance to say anything, I opened the front door and left.

WHAT I WOULDN'T GIVE FOR A CIGARETTE. THAT THOUGHT KEPT TUMBLING IN my mind. I still had a carton left in the bottom drawer of my dresser. The temptation to go get it made my skin tingle, but I kept my butt planted in my chair at my kitchen island as I drank my third cup of coffee.

I was so wrapped up in battling back that temptation that I didn't know someone was in my house until I felt them touch my shoulder.

"Shiloh."

My soul tried to leave my body as I jumped out of my chair. Half of my coffee sloshed over the rim of my mug and splashed onto the counter. I faced who was behind me, finding Knox. I put a hand to my chest. "Cheese and rice, Knox."

"I knocked on the front door and called out to you when I came in," he said.

I chastised myself for being so spaced out as I grabbed a tea towel to clean up the spilled coffee. "What's up?"

"I need to pick up the food for the party. Come with me." It wasn't a request.

I gaped at him. "You haven't picked up the food yet? The party starts in a few hours."

"I've been busy."

I left the kitchen with my mouth pinched shut. I would not judge his *wait 'til the last possible minute* party-planning style. Nope. I shoved my feet into some sandals and grabbed my purse.

We drove to the grocery store in Knox's Camaro and almost the entire ride was silent. Almost.

“We need to talk about this morning,” he said out of the blue.

“I’m sorry you saw my vagina, Knox,” I snapped, feeling mortified. “I would appreciate it if it was never brought up again.”

He kept his eyes fixed on the road. “I wasn’t talking about that.”

“Oh.”

He pulled into the store’s lot and found a parking space toward the front. “Why aren’t you sleeping?”

I watched him shift the car into park but not turn off the engine. “We’re not here for food, are we?” I asked.

“We just need ice, but you would have suspected something was up if I asked you to go get ice with me.”

I clasped my hands together tightly in my lap. It was a subtle way I could react without letting him know I was upset. “And you say I’m a pain in the butt.”

“You’re avoiding answering.”

“I have been sleeping,” I said nonchalantly, hoping he’d feel like he was making this a bigger thing than it was.

He frowned at me. “When was the last time you got a full night’s rest?”

“I’ve had a rough couple of nights.”

“You haven’t slept since what happened with Jacob?”

I shrugged.

“You haven’t really talked about what happened.”

I laughed dryly as I stared out the window. “I haven’t talked about Jacob because there isn’t anything to discuss. I am disturbingly unfazed by what he tried to do to me.” My tone had turned bitter and there was no hiding my irritation. “I was terrified at the time. But there are different levels of terror. Ones that will leave scars on your soul forever and completely break your sanity. As you try to move on, you’ll find yourself in a constant state of hating the idea of tomorrow, yet hoping you’re strong enough to see it.” I let out a sigh and leaned my head back against the headrest. “With that said, it’s completely normal to have difficulty sleeping. You’re making this a bigger deal than it is. I’m sure I’m going to sleep like a baby tonight.”

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself of that?”

I unbuckled my seat belt and climbed out of the car. “Let’s get the ice so we can get back.” I did my best not to slam the car door.

Knox turned off the car and followed after me. “I think you need to consider talking to—”

I stopped in my tracks just before entering the store and whirled around to face him. “Just because I’m an orphan and alone, I don’t need you to step in to be a parental figure for me.” I regretted my harsh words the moment they left my mouth, but my need for him to let it go had overridden me.

His expression hardened. “I’ve never seen you as a child.”

“Then why?” I snapped.

“You seriously don’t know the answer to that?”

My shoulders slumped. He was an overbearing, pushy butthead because he cared. “I’m acting like a brat.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “At least you’re self-aware.”

I scowled at him. “Are you aware that you can be a real ass sometimes?”

That got him to smile. “I’m fully aware.”

Fighting to not smile, I shook my head. “Thank you for worrying about me, but I am fine.”

His smile dropped. “You’re not fine, Shiloh.”

That was true. “I’ll be alright, though.”

“Would you tell me or any of us if you weren’t?”

He was asking me to promise something I wasn’t sure I could deliver. “I think you’d know if I wasn’t.” Before he could push the matter, I grabbed his hand and tilted my head toward the store. “Can we please get the ice and get back home? I still have a bunch more decorations to put up and need to finish Keelan’s cake.”

He stared down at my hand. I thought he might pull his from my grasp. When he didn’t, I tugged a little as I took a step toward the entrance. His fingers closed around mine and we went inside.

Music was playing inside and out back. All the decorations were up. Colt and Creed had blown up all the balloons for me. Snacks and drinks had been set out on the dining room table. The bell rang as I was writing *Happy Birthday, Keelan* with frosting on his two-tier, double-chocolate cake. Creed went to answer it. All of them had been standing around me in the kitchen as I finished the last touches to the cake.

Standing up straight, I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand. “All done.”

Keelan smiled. "It looks amazing." He and Knox were leaning against the kitchen counter near the sink. Both had beers in their hands.

Colt was sitting at the island, smiling at me. "You got frosting on your forehead."

Keelan grabbed a napkin and held it out to me.

"I was bound to get chocolate somewhere." I took the napkin and wiped at my forehead as I walked over to the sink. Turning on the tap, I washed away the chocolate all over my hands. "I'm glad I didn't get any on my clothes." I was wearing the new white cover-up dress over my new white bikini.

As I was drying my hands on a tea towel, Knox stepped closer. I froze mid-drying as his hand came up under my chin and he gently swiped his thumb along my jaw. "You got chocolate here, too."

"Hey," a feminine voice said.

"Hey, Stephanie," Keelan said.

Stephanie was the beautiful front receptionist who worked at Desert Stone. She didn't like me, and I had a feeling it had to do with her feelings for Knox. I scrunched my nose at the thought of her being here. Knox's brows lifted in question. I schooled my face before I turned.

Stephanie was staring at me, eyes narrowed a little. She looked from me to Knox before returning her attention to Keelan. She plastered a smile on her face and held out a gift bag to him. "This is for you. Happy birthday!"

Keelan took it with a kind smile. "Thank you." Keelan looked to me. "Is there a place we can put gifts?"

"Yes, there is." I moved to take the gift from him at the same time Creed returned to the kitchen.

Stephanie looked back and forth between Keelan and me as I took her gift from Keelan's hands. "Does she live here or something? Why do you need to ask her where to put your gifts in your own home?" She let out a dry laugh like she found it funny.

The tension in the room became thick and all the guys seemed to go still. Even Creed froze before taking a seat on the stool next to Colt at the island.

Keelan's kind smile dropped. "Shiloh busted her ass to make today extra special for me. It makes her happy for everything to have a place and what makes her happy makes me happy."

I was as shocked as I was touched by what he said.

"Oh, I didn't know you two were dating," Stephanie said.

The tension increased and I took that as my opportunity to leave the room. I didn't want to hear Keelan correct her. I set her gift on the coffee table in the living room, then went to Colt's room to get mine. As I walked into his room, the doorbell rang again.

Needing a minute, I sat on Colt's bed next to my gifts for Keelan. Shame was twisting up my stomach. I should have been the one to correct her about Keelan and me. I hoped Colt and Creed didn't take me dashing out of there the wrong way. Maybe I was overthinking things because I felt guilty about having feelings for my boyfriends' older brothers.

"Shi."

I looked up and saw Keelan standing in the doorway. "Sorry. I was just about to head out," I said, grabbing his gifts.

"What's going on?" he asked as he moved into the room and sat next to me on the bed.

"Nothing." I fiddled with a hair tie I had around my wrist. I needed to pull my hair up. As pretty as it was down, it was too hot, especially if we were going to be outside, hanging by the pool.

He pointed to the gifts I was holding. "Are those for me?"

"No, I bought these for myself," I teased, making him smile. "I was bringing them out for you to open later."

"Can I open them now?" he asked.

I held one out to him. "You're the birthday boy."

He opened the first one and pulled out two sets of pajamas for men. One set was Superman, and the other was Batman. He let out a genuine laugh as he looked them over. "Now we can match," he said.

I handed him the second gift and he unwrapped it, revealing a collector's edition box set of all the seasons of *Game of Thrones*. He looked it over, reading that it came with bonus scenes. "Our *Game of Thrones* dates are going to be even better." He wrapped his arms around me and hugged me tightly. "Thank you, baby girl."

I hugged him back. I made the mistake of breathing his scent in. It was addictive and heady. Keelan pulled away slowly, stopping when our faces were inches apart. He cupped my cheek and his eyes dropped to my lips. Right then, I wanted nothing more than for him to kiss me. I wanted it badly, but I wouldn't do that to Colt and Creed again.

I pulled away, clearing my throat. "You're welcome." Needing to occupy myself, I took my hair tie off my wrist and twisted it around my fingers. "We

should return to the party.”

“I’d rather stay in here with you,” he said, making my heart skip a beat.

My hair tie flew out of my hands. “Dang it,” I said, standing from the bed. I searched the floor, not seeing it anywhere. “I’m going to have to run back home and get another one.”

Keelan searched the floor. “Maybe it rolled under the bed or nightstand.”

I got down on my hands and knees. I felt around under the bed and behind Keelan’s feet. When I stuck my hand under the nightstand, my fingers landed on what felt like my hair tie. I scooped it up. “I found it,” I said, holding it up to show Keelan. Staying on my knees, I began to gather my hair on top of my head.

Keelan stood from the bed and smiled down at me. “You missed some,” he said, curling a tiny chunk of hair by my ear around his finger.

The bedroom door opened and Colt walked in, Knox a step behind him. They both froze, staring at us. Colt’s eyes went a little wide and Knox looked pissed.

I finished getting my hair in a messy bun and dropped my hands. “What?”

Colt cleared his throat. “What are you doing kneeling on the floor?”

Before I could answer, Keelan snorted.

“Apparently I need to teach all of you how to lock a fucking door,” Knox snapped.

“You have no room to talk,” Keelan shot back, smirking. “It was only this morning we caught you with Shiloh laid out on the kitchen island.”

“That wasn’t what it looked like,” Knox seethed.

Keelan gestured to me. “And this is?”

“Time out!” I barked. “I don’t understand what is going on.” I looked to Colt for clarification.

He looked like he was trying desperately to keep a straight face. “We walked in and saw you on your knees in front of Keelan.”

“So? I dropped my hair tie and it rolled under your nightstand.”

“You were pulling up your hair and it looked like...” Colt trailed off.

I looked up Keelan and then it clicked. I sat back on my haunches as heat bloomed in my cheeks.

“There it is.” Keelan grinned down at me.

Wide-eyed, I looked at Colt again. “You thought I was about to go down on Keelan?”

He rubbed the back of his head. “Well...”

“You thought I would cheat on you?” I was crushed. I shouldn’t have been surprised. I had feelings for Keelan, and I’d acted on them once with a kiss. The damage had been done, and I’d lost their trust.

“What?” Colt asked, looking perplexed.

I looked down at the floor. If he and Creed couldn’t trust me, how was our relationship going to work?

“No, babe,” Colt said, taking a step toward me.

“What are you all doing in here?” Creed asked as he appeared in the doorway. “Keelan, did you forget that everyone is here to see you?” Creed’s gaze landed on me and his expression hardened. “What happened?”

“I’m guessing none of you have talked to her yet?” Knox asked, sounding pissed.

Creed’s anger evaporated and Colt looked...guilty?

Keelan shrugged at his older brother. “Don’t look at me. They’ve been hogging all her time.”

I looked around at all of them. “What?”

Knox cursed and moved toward me. “The three of you need to get your shit together,” he snapped as he grabbed me from under my arms and lifted me to my feet. “Come help me cook.” He didn’t leave me much choice. He ushered me from the room. “Don’t cry,” he said as we walked through the house.

I stopped walking in the dining room and spun around to face him. “I’m not going to cry. I just...I fucked up. I kissed Keelan and now they can’t trust me.” I wouldn’t cry for that.

His eyes bounced all over my face. “What would you do if that was the case?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’d need some time.”

“For?”

“To come up with a game plan to earn their trust back.”

His brows rose.

“Is that what they’ve been meaning to talk to me about? What happened between Keelan and me?” I asked.

“What they want to talk to you about is between you and them.” Knox gestured toward the back door. “I need to get the grill set up.”

Before I could turn to go out back, the doorbell rang. Knox moved to go answer it, but I grabbed him by his shirt. “I’ll answer it.” I walked past him.

“I’ll meet you outside,” I shot over my shoulder.

I opened the door to a very good-looking man standing outside. He towered over me with a hand braced on the door frame. He had raven hair and his eyes were covered by dark sunglasses. His bottom lip was pierced and the white T-shirt he wore looked a little snug against his muscled, tattooed arms. The gift he held in his hand looked dainty against his tattooed fingers.

“Hi, are you here for Keelan’s party?” I greeted.

He took off his sunglasses, revealing a familiar shade of aquamarine eyes. “I am. Who are you, gorgeous?”

I felt a body behind me before a grumbly voice said, “Off limits.”

The guy smirked at Knox over my head. “Oh, really?”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to make it,” Knox said.

“I said I’d do my best to make it,” the guy corrected. “We were down a mechanic at the shop, but we finally found someone to hire a few days ago.”

Knox nodded. “The price of being the boss. I’m glad you were able to come. It’s been too long.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “This is Shiloh.”

I held my hand out. “Hi.”

He gave me a charming smile that reminded me of Keelan’s and engulfed my hand with his tattooed one. “Micah. How did a sweet little thing like you end up with this mean bastard?”

“I said she’s off limits. Not that she’s mine,” Knox said.

“Keelan’s?” Micah asked.

“It doesn’t matter who she’s with,” Keelan said, coming up beside me. “She’s off limits, you womanizing fool.”

Knox pulled me back a step and Keelan squeezed by to hug Micah. Micah returned the hug with a big smile and loud pats on Keelan’s back. “Pot meet kettle, cousin,” he said to Keelan. “There have been times you showed me up when it came to picking up women.”

Keelan pulled away. “That’s because I’m prettier than you.”

Cousin? “I thought his eyes looked like Colt and Creed’s,” I blurted out loud.

Micah’s attention flicked to me. “It’s a Stone gene.”

I glanced back at Knox, then forward at Keelan, taking in their golden-brown eyes.

“We have our mother’s eyes,” Keelan said, answering the question I was sure I had written on my face.

I felt Knox tense up behind me. I couldn't remember a time Knox had ever mentioned their mother. Based on his reaction to Keelan speaking of her... "Well, it was nice meeting you, Micah," I said quickly. "Gifts go on the coffee table in the living room." I turned to face Knox. "Let's go grill some food."

Knox stepped aside so I could walk ahead of him.

Colt and Creed walked into the living room as we were heading for the backyard. As I was walking by, Creed grabbed my hand and pulled me down the hall.

I glanced back at Knox. He watched us for a second before continuing on toward the backyard without me. "I was going to help Knox," I said as I let Creed lead me.

"You can help him in a minute," Creed shot over his shoulder.

The moment we walked back into Colt's room, Creed spun around and picked me up by the backs of my thighs. My legs locked around his waist and I wrapped my arms around his neck. I faintly heard the sound of the door closing behind me. As he held me, Creed walked toward the door until my back met a chest—Colt's chest. Colt's hands went to my hips and Creed took another step forward, pinning me between them. I couldn't breathe without my rib cage pushing against both of them.

"We need you to listen very carefully, because we're about to have that talk you wanted," Creed said, his eyes boring into mine. "You are our girlfriend. You wanted to know how this is done. To be honest, we don't know."

"You have to have some idea. Weren't you in a relationship with the same girl before?" I asked.

They both tensed up. I hoped it was out of surprise and not out of lingering feelings they still had for Emma.

"My money is on Keelan," Colt said behind me.

"That bastard does love to let shit slip," Creed grumbled.

"You've also mentioned her," I pointed out.

Colt's hands moved up to my waist. "We cared for her, but what we have with you is different."

"How so?" I asked.

"She was selfish and spoiled," Creed said, his tone curt.

"Creed," Colt admonished.

Creed looked past me at his brother. "She was and you know it." Creed's

eyes flicked to mine. “I didn’t see the negatives—how she took and took from us. She never wanted to get to know Keelan and Knox.”

“She hated Knox,” Colt said. “And he hated her.”

“She didn’t understand our bond or what it was like to lose a parent. She was our girlfriend, but she wasn’t what we needed. I didn’t realize that until you showed up,” Creed said.

Colt’s arms wrapped around my stomach and hugged me from behind. “You’re the least selfish person I know, babe. Hell, you fight us when we try to do anything for you.”

“From the very beginning, you included Keelan and Knox,” Creed said. “You not only take Knox’s bullshit head-on and throw it back at him, but you understand why he is the way he is.”

“You slid into our lives like you were always meant to be there,” Colt said.

If they kept saying wonderful things like that, I’d start crying.

Creed leaned his forehead against mine. “So when I say I don’t know how this works...it’s because you’re not just what we need, but what Keelan and Knox need, too.”

I stopped breathing and I forgot how to blink.

“Well, Knox isn’t exactly on board yet,” Colt added.

Creed rolled his eyes. “After catching him this morning with her splayed before him like his personal buffet, it’s very obvious he’s in denial.”

That knocked me out of my shock. I really wished they’d forget that had happened.

Colt sighed. “He thinks he’s being a good brother.”

“He’s being a stubborn ass,” Creed snapped. “But let’s get back to the point we’re trying to make.”

Colt brushed his nose along my ear and whispered, “We know you have feelings for them, too.”

I was about to deny it, but Creed kissed me before I could. He pulled away with a smirk. “You aren’t allowed to be in denial like Knox. We see how you look at them. The only reason I’m not turning into a possessive caveman is because you look at us the same way.”

“This is the *talk* Knox said you needed to have with me?” I asked.

Creed nodded.

“After you kissed Keelan—” Colt started to say.

“And Knox,” Creed interrupted.

“Knox kissed me,” I corrected.

Colt huffed a laugh. “Regardless of who kissed who, the four of us knew it was time to have a talk about our feelings for you and how that would affect us.”

“So the four of you all discussed sharing me?” I asked. I was a little peeved I hadn’t been included in that particular conversation. What if I didn’t want to be shared between the four of them? Not saying I didn’t. It just would have been nice to be asked.

“When you say it like—” Colt said with a strained voice at the same time Creed bluntly answered, “Yes.”

I appreciated the bluntness for this particular conversation, which was causing my head to spin a little. It had taken me a while to wrap my brain around dating Colt and Creed, but also pursuing relationships with Keelan and possibly Knox? “That’s the talk you had when Jacob attacked me?”

Colt’s arms tightened around me. “I shouldn’t have asked you to leave. You told me about him, and I should have made sure you got to your car safely.”

I threw an arm back and around Colt’s neck. I tilted to the side a little so I could see him. “Don’t do that. You had no way of knowing what was going to happen.” I pulled on him a little, wanting him to kiss me.

He saw what I wanted and pressed his lips to mine. He moved one of his hands under my chin, holding me in place as he stroked his tongue past my lips. Every time they kissed me, it set my blood on fire and that heat always rushed between my legs. Forgetting that my legs were wrapped around Creed’s waist, I tried to squeeze them shut.

Creed’s hands moved to my butt under my dress. “Not that I’m complaining about where this might head, but it is Keelan’s birthday and we’re not done talking,” he said, sounding amused.

I pulled away from Colt, a little breathless, and faced forward.

Creed took in my flushed appearance and swollen lips with a torn look.

Colt cleared his throat. “Do you understand what we’ve told you, babe?”

“You’re telling me it’s alright for me to date Keelan and Knox as well.” I was relieved that I hadn’t screwed things up between us and ruined their trust after I’d kissed Keelan. I unhooked my legs from around Creed. He set me down on my feet and I stepped out from between them. “I’m going to need time to process everything.”

THE PARTY WAS IN FULL SWING. A BUNCH OF KEELAN'S FRIENDS, SOME employees who worked at the gym, and Ethan and Isabelle had all shown up. People were in the pool, including the twins and Ethan. Isabelle was sitting by the steps with her feet in the water, laughing at Ethan's antics. Some people were sitting around the firepit, which wasn't lit because it was hotter than Hades out. Keelan was standing next to the pool with a small group of friends, talking, smiling, and drinking beer. Knox and I were working next to each other in the outdoor kitchen while Micah supervised us from where he sat on one of the four bar stools that bordered one side of the kitchen, drinking a beer.

"You don't like melon," Knox said as he flipped burgers on the grill.

"I know," I said as I continued to cut up a melon for the fruit salad I was making.

"Then why are you adding it?" he asked.

"Just because I don't like it doesn't mean other people don't like it. I know you and your brothers do," I said, holding out a piece of honeydew.

He eyed it with a frown, then took it from my wet fingers and plopped the whole thing in his mouth.

I returned to cutting. "Plus, it adds a pop of color to the fruit salad."

"And why is that important?" Knox asked.

"When something is appealing to the eye, people are more inclined to eat it," I explained.

"I couldn't agree more, gorgeous," Micah said, taking a sip of his beer with a sly grin.

Knox shot Micah a look, the corner of his mouth tugged upward.

Did he...he wasn't talking about food. "I swear, you Stone boys really love to make things dirty."

Micah's pretty eyes flicked to me and he gave me this smirk that was purely male. "That's because we Stone boys know a good time is better spent being dirty. Hell, the dirtier the better, in my opinion."

The way he said that made my heart race a little.

"But you probably already knew that, seeing how you're dating one," he said with a wink.

Heat traveled up my neck to my cheeks. Micah went to take another drink from his beer, but paused as he took in my reaction.

I tucked a wisp of hair behind my ear and went back to cutting.

"Or maybe you don't know," Micah mumbled.

"That's enough," Knox said, his tone full of warning.

Micah put his hands up.

I had two more slivers of melon to cut left. Laughter caught my attention and I glanced over at Keelan. He and his friends were laughing. Two in his group were a couple. The guy was standing behind his girlfriend with his arms around her.

"It's so hot out, we should just jump in," I heard him say to her.

"I need to change into my suit first," his girlfriend said.

I focused back on cutting.

"They'll dry," I heard him say.

I was slicing the rind off from the last sliver when an ear-piercing scream came out of nowhere. Fear surged through me like lightning and penetrated my soul. I jumped and pain ripped across my palm. I looked down. Blood leaked from my hand onto the cutting board. I looked at the chef's knife clutched in my other hand. The blade had blood smeared along the tip. With fear already overwhelming me, I couldn't stop myself from being pulled to the dark corner of my mind—the place I tried to avoid with all my might.

I could see them.

I could see their bodies.

There had been so much blood. I could still smell it. Pennies. Dirty pennies. Each inhale I took, my lungs constricted, refusing to take in the tainted air.

Wanting to escape, I took a step back, then another.

"Shiloh?" I heard Knox say.

"What's wrong with her?" I heard Micah say next.

I couldn't see them.

I couldn't tell what was real.

"Shiloh?" Knox said again.

I sensed someone stepping closer. My entire body shook, thinking it was Mr. X. I tried to suck in just a little bit of air and ended up gasping. "It's not real," I forced out. Tears leaked from my wide eyes. I couldn't close them. I hated what I was seeing but was too scared to blink.

"That's right. It's not real. You're standing right here with me." Knox's voice was so close to my ear.

Then I felt a presence behind me. An arm wrapped around my middle and a hand grasped me around my wrist. I startled and struggled to get away.

"It's me. I have you, Shiloh." Knox's voice pulled at me like a tether to home.

"Knox," I whimpered.

"I'm right here with you," he said against my ear. I could feel him. I could feel his chest against my back, his breath tickling my neck.

I'm safe. Taking a leap of faith, I closed my eyes. Even with them closed, I could still see my family. My mother's eyes were open and staring right at me. *It's not real.*

Hands cupped my cheeks. "Breathe, baby girl. You gotta breathe."

Keelan.

My tight lungs relaxed, allowing me to suck in delicious air, and I opened my eyes. Keelan was right there, staring down at me. "That's it," he said.

As I continued to pull air in and out of my lungs, my gaze traveled past Keelan. Micah was standing behind him, watching me—watching us—with wide, worried eyes. I looked to the hand that held my wrist tightly. I wondered why Knox's grasp was downright bruising, but I got my answer when I saw that I still had the chef's knife clutched in my hand.

Keelan's eyes followed where I was staring. He dropped a hand from my face and put it around my fist. "Give me the knife."

I uncurled my stiff fingers, and the moment the knife was gone from my hand, my knees gave out. "I'm sorry."

Knox's grip around my middle tightened and he held me. "It's alright." His voice was gentle.

A sob ripped from my chest. "I'm so sorry."

"I know. It's alright," Knox said as he moved his arm behind my legs and scooped me up in his arms. "I'm going to get her cleaned up. Take the food

off the grill and get Colt or Creed to help clean up,” Knox said in a low voice.

“I’ll help him,” Micah said.

Knox didn’t protest. He moved, carrying me toward the back door. I rested my head against his shoulder, numb or in shock. I couldn’t really tell.

“Shi?!” I heard Creed yell, followed by splashing in the pool.

“She’s fine! Both of you come over here and help me!” Keelan shouted.

Once inside, we passed Stephanie. She watched us walk by with a scowl. Knox carried me down the hall that led to his and Keelan’s rooms. We passed a few closed doors until we came to the end of the hall, where one last door was. Knox opened it and we went inside. It was obviously his bedroom. It was large and full of light. I only got a quick glance, but from what I saw, there was an espresso bedroom set and white linens on the bed.

Knox took me into a connected bathroom and set me on the counter. He flicked the light on and ripped a towel off the rack next to the shower. He grabbed my hand gently and turned it palm-side up. My entire hand was pretty much covered with drying blood. I sniffled as I wiped at my wet cheeks with my other hand.

His gaze shot up to meet mine. “Does it hurt?”

“I’ve been cut worse than this.”

“That’s not what I asked,” he grumbled.

“No. It doesn’t hurt.” I could barely feel it compared to everything else I was feeling.

He wet the towel in the sink and began wiping away the blood around my cut.

“I could have hurt you,” I said.

“I was more worried you’d hurt yourself.”

“Better me than you.”

“Don’t say shit like that,” he snapped and threw the towel in the sink.

More tears slipped from my eyes. “I couldn’t live with myself if I hurt you.”

He stared at me with a pained expression. His hand lifted from his side and cupped my cheek. With my good hand, I touched the back of his as his thumb brushed away a tear rolling down my cheek. I leaned into his palm, desperate for comfort. He must have sensed it because his hand moved behind my neck and he pulled me to him. I laid my forehead against his chest and closed my eyes as his fingers began to knead up the back of my neck to the base of my skull.

It felt so good, I couldn't hold back from groaning. I hadn't realized how tense my entire body had been until I slowly started to relax against him. My eyes felt heavy. It would have been so easy to drift off, but panic began to build inside.

I pulled away from him, sitting up straight. He gave me a pensive look as I gently pushed his hand away from my neck. "I'll fall asleep if you keep doing that."

"You could use some sleep."

"It's Keelan's birthday—"

"He would understand."

I stared down at the cut on my hand. It went straight across my lifeline. "Do you think it will scar?"

He sighed through his nose. He knew I was changing the subject, but for once he didn't call me out. He shook his head. "I don't think it will." He moved toward the door. "Keelan has a first aid kit in his bathroom. I'll be right back," he told me before leaving.

I looked around. He had a nice, modern bathroom. The vanity had a white marble counter and the cabinet beneath was espresso. The glass shower had black subway tiling and shiny silver fixtures. The only con to his beautiful bathroom was the lack of a tub.

I rubbed my forehead, feeling embarrassed. I hoped I hadn't ruined Keelan's birthday. I was trying not to let my insecurities win. I tried not to listen to them or think about how much of a crazy mess Knox probably thought I was.

Feeling a headache coming on, I slid off the counter and left the bathroom to search for my purse. I was pretty sure I had a small bottle of painkillers in it.

As I walked into the living room, heading toward Colt's room on the opposite end of the house, Stephanie stepped in my way.

Just by the sneer on her face, I knew I wasn't going to like what was coming.

"You've been playing the 'little broken girl' act well," she said.

I frowned. "What?"

"I think it's really pathetic, but when you've got nothing else to entice with, I guess desperate measures are needed." She sighed dramatically. "I can't believe you've got Knox fooled. He's pretty good at sniffing out bullshit. I guess jailbait pussy can make even a man like Knox overlook shit."

The bigger person would have walked away. I had been good and let her get away with treating me poorly multiple times. *Kill with kindness*, as my mother would have said. For a split second, I'd debated taking the moral high ground, but then she'd brought Knox into it. "I thought I had nothing else to entice with?" There was nothing I could do about the irritation in my voice. My patience with her had tapped out. "So which is it? Am I pretending to be a little broken girl or am I only holding their attention with my jailbait pussy?"

Her face tightened up with anger.

"I get that you have a thing for Knox, but you're a grown-ass woman," I snapped. "Get control of your jealousy and stop trying to tear me down because of it."

"You're right. I am a woman," she seethed, stepping closer. "And Knox is a man. You're just a girl still in high school."

Well, that added to the list of crap I shouldn't have been insecure about. I'd told myself I wouldn't compare myself to her when it came to her flawless beauty. I didn't, despite all my nasty scars. However, I'd never thought I would have to worry about age. Knox had said he didn't see me as a child, but that didn't change the fact that Stephanie was closer to Knox in age. I hated how much that bothered me.

"Shiloh," Knox's grumbly voice sounded from behind me.

Stephanie looked past my shoulder and took a step back with a megawatt smile. "Knox, I didn't see you there. I was just checking on your friend."

I glanced over my shoulder, finding Knox standing a few feet behind me. He had bandages clutched in his hand. His schooled expression made him appear calm. The fury burning in his eyes told me differently.

"Checking on her?" he said, giving her a puzzled look that was almost genuine.

Stephanie flicked her pretty blonde hair off her shoulder. "Yeah."

"What did she say?" he asked her.

Her smile dimmed a little. "What?"

Knox moved closer, stopping to stand next to me, his gaze never leaving Stephanie. "You said you were checking on her. I assume she told you how she was doing. What did she say?"

"Oh—uh," she stammered, her smile completely gone. "She said she was fine."

Knox looked at me. The way his searing gaze bored into my eyes made

me feel exposed—like he was reading everything I was feeling like a book. “She doesn’t look fine.”

Stephanie briefly glanced at me. “I suppose she doesn’t.”

Knox’s signature frown surfaced as he looked back at her. “Maybe she’s putting on a bullshit act?”

I watched the blood drain from Stephanie’s face.

“Not that it matters to me,” he said, his tone turning cold. “Apparently all I care about is what’s between her legs.”

Panic filled her wide eyes. “Knox—”

“Don’t bother,” he snapped at her. “I heard everything.”

“I—” she started to say.

“You should leave,” he cut her off again.

Hurt molded her features and a tiny part of me actually felt bad for her. She barreled past us, storming toward the door. She barely slowed to scoop up her purse that was on the table next to the couch. We both stood there, in silence, watching her exit until the front door slammed behind her.

“Where were you going?” Knox asked, the icy rage still lingering in his voice.

“I feel a headache coming on and was going to see if I had medicine in my purse.”

“I have medicine in my bathroom. You should have stayed put,” he snapped.

I turned to face him fully. “Are you mad at me for not being psychic?”

Keelan chose that moment to come inside from the backyard. He looked from me to Knox, reading the tension, and wisely stayed quiet.

Knox ignored Keelan and glared down at me. “No. I’m mad about what just happened. How long has that been going on?”

I sighed and walked away into the kitchen.

“Shiloh?” Knox pushed, following me. “How long has Stephanie been treating you like that?”

“Stephanie?” Keelan said.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Knox said to him.

I grabbed a glass from one of the kitchen cabinets. “A while,” I answered as I filled my glass with water from the fridge.

Knox cursed. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

I took a small sip. “I sort of tried. When you confronted her, she lied to you. You believed her. So I let it go.”

“Damn it, Shiloh. Now who’s wanting who to be psychic?” Knox snapped.

Touché.

He pointed to his side of the house. “Get your ass back in the bathroom,” he said, anger straining his voice. “While I bandage your hand, I want you to tell me everything that has happened with Stephanie.”

My hackles rose at being ordered around.

He seemed to notice. “Don’t make me throw you over my shoulder.”

I was tempted to see him try.

“One of these days we should have you two spar,” Keelan said, reminding me that he was there and breaking the tension. “You may have Shiloh beat on strength and size, but she’s quick-thinking and has a lot of stamina.”

“Well, you know what they say.” I smirked at Knox. “The bigger they are, the harder they fall.” Taking my water with me, I walked past them and went back to Knox’s bathroom.

I TOLD KNOX AND KEELAN ABOUT EVERY INTERACTION I'D HAD WITH Stephanie. Colt and Creed showed up just before I finished. The three of them listened as Knox told them what he had overheard Stephanie say to me before he'd asked her to leave. Colt and Creed were pissed and voiced that she should be fired. Keelan and Knox agreed they would discuss Stephanie's future at Desert Stone later. Then the topic switched to how I had cut my hand. Keelan had an idea of what had happened. He knew I'd had an episode, but that was it. Colt and Creed knew nothing. Knox and Keelan had been the only ones to witness me have an episode before. Knox helped me explain what had happened from his point of view.

"What triggers them?" Creed asked.

"Fear, mostly. Hearing a woman screaming. Blood," I answered. "Believe it or not, I handle them a lot better than I used to. I've learned to stop an episode before it happens. When she screamed, I felt the fear, but I had control. Then I saw that I had cut my hand. The blood and the knife—it was too many things that reminded me of that night."

"That's why you don't like to watch horror movies," Colt said.

"Slasher or home invasion movies are an absolute no. Something fantasy or paranormal, like with vampires for example, is tolerable, but the suspense still gets to me," I explained. "It really sucks because I used to love horror movies. Shayla and I would have themed horror movie nights and gorge on popcorn."

"What was your favorite scary movie?" Creed asked.

I smiled. "IT. Shayla was terrified of clowns. So because my beautiful, brave, and tough-as-nails sister couldn't handle watching it and I could, it

gave me this twisted joy.”

The corner of Knox’s mouth lifted a little as he began bandaging my hand.

After that, we returned to the party. Colt and Creed refused to leave my side for the rest of the evening. Micah kept eyeing me, but other than that, Keelan’s party continued on without another mishap.

That night I slept a broken three hours and barely an hour the next night. Every time I dozed off, I was back in that house, watching my family die. I felt like I was stuck in a nonstop cycle of fear, pain, and blood. What upset me the most was that I was too exhausted to run.

The sun was barely shining behind the mountains. Sitting on my porch steps, I fiddled with the cigarette carton and lighter that I’d dug out of my dresser in my hands. I needed something—anything to give me a little bit of relief.

With my mind made up, I pulled out a cigarette, put it between my lips, and lit the end. I inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly with closed eyes. I rested my head on the heels of my hands, hating that I loved it so much. Why had breathing become so difficult, yet pulling toxic smoke into my lungs was so easy?

Eyes still closed, I took another pull and another from the stupid cancer stick. I rubbed my hands up and down my face, trying to keep myself awake.

“You’re smoking again?”

I almost groaned. I should have sat out back. The reason I hadn’t was because I didn’t want to see my swing that was still lying on the ground in pieces. “I had a rough night. I’m too tired to run and it’s a better alternative to drinking.” I looked up at Knox. He was standing in front of me with his gym bag hanging on his shoulder.

“You’re still not sleeping?” he asked.

I didn’t reply. Instead, I took another drag from my cigarette.

He watched, frowning. “Running, smoking, drinking—everything you do to escape is all temporary. Eventually, they won’t be enough to block out what you’re refusing to deal with.”

I knew that. I was fully aware of what I was doing to myself to avoid what was too hard to face. I was tired of hard. It was my reality every day. Dragging myself out of bed, putting one foot in front of the other, and, of course, breathing was hard. I knew I was using Band-Aids to cover holes in a sinking ship. I knew it. My head was already below the water. But I couldn’t

find the strength to stop because Band-Aids were easy. I needed something to be easy.

I finished off my cigarette and put it out against the step. "I'm too tired to go toe-to-toe with you right now," I said, getting to my feet. "I need to get ready for school." I turned away from him and went inside before he could say anything more.

School was rough. I could barely keep my eyes open in all of my classes. I sat out during gym. Colt and Creed kept asking if I was okay. I lied, saying I wasn't feeling good.

I was chugging down my fourth energy drink today as I walked into Desert Stone.

"Welcome to Desert Stone Fitness," a man greeted me from the front desk.

I had to do a double take when I realized it wasn't Stephanie sitting there, but instead a ginger-haired, buff guy. Not as buff as Knox, but he clearly worked out regularly.

"Hi," I greeted back as I walked up to the desk. I spotted his name embroidered on his Desert Stone polo. It read *Derek*. "Are you new?"

His hazel eyes gave me a once-over before his mouth stretched into a boyish grin. "No. I'm one of the personal trainers here, but I'm covering the front desk temporarily."

Ah. I hadn't met all the personal trainers yet. I wondered what had happened to Stephanie.

"Was there anything I could help you with?" he asked before his eyes drifted over my head.

"No. I—" I started to say when I felt a presence behind me.

"I thought you weren't feeling well," I heard Knox say.

Colt or Creed must have told him that. I turned around and looked up. "I'm feeling better."

His arms were crossed over his chest, making his navy polo stretch tight around his large biceps. He spotted the energy drink in my hand and took the can from me with a sigh. "You look terrible."

"That is an awful thing to say to a girl," I chastised. What he'd said was

true. I had dark circles under my eyes, which I guessed I'd failed at hiding with concealer, and I was paler than normal.

He held up the can. "This isn't going to help. You need to go home and sleep."

My hand squeezed around the strap of my gym bag as I walked away toward the hallway behind the front desk. "Can't. I have a class to teach with Keelan."

Knox cursed as he followed me. "I don't want you driving home after."

Derek watched us with curious eyes until we disappeared down the hall.

"I mean it, Shiloh," Knox said, following me into his office.

I dropped my bag in one of the chairs placed in front of his desk and dug my keys out. I held them out to him. "Fine."

He took them, but he wasn't happy about it. I found that odd because I'd given him what he wanted. "Remember when I asked you if you would tell me when you weren't fine?" he asked as he stared down at me with his penetrating gaze. "What did you say?"

I folded my arms over my chest. "I said you'd know if I wasn't."

He nodded. "Do you want to know one of the ways I can tell you're not alright?"

I didn't bother asking what. I knew he was going to tell me anyway.

"You don't fight me on things as much anymore," he said and held up my keys to prove his point. "It was the same this morning. Instead of standing up to me like you normally do, you ran."

My gaze dropped to the floor. "Maybe I'm tired of fighting."

He pocketed my keys. "That's what I'm afraid of."

I took a step backward toward the door. "I'm going to be late if I don't leave now."

He watched me retreat without stopping me. When I was standing in the hall, I left without looking back. I supposed I'd run away from him again.

"Bye!"

"See you next class!"

Keelan and I waved at the last of the students as they left the class. Once the door closed behind them, I let out a tired sigh.

“What’s going on, Shi?” Keelan asked as he looked me over. It wasn’t the first time he had done it, either. He’d kept side-eyeing me while we’d taught as if he’d been worried I’d fall over at any minute.

“I’m just tired,” I said and quickly tried to change the subject. “I had fun today. What are we going to cover in the next class?”

He gave me a knowing look. “Nice try.”

My shoulders slumped. *Not him, too.* It was bad enough with Knox up my butt.

“Hey.” Keelan grabbed my hand. “Don’t make that face.” He pulled me closer, so we were standing face to face. He tucked some stray hairs behind my ear. “You got us all worried about you.”

“There’s nothing to worry about. I’m fine.”

He cupped the back of my neck and put his other hand on the small of my back, pulling me even closer. He frowned down at me. “You really are a terrible liar.”

“So I’ve been told.” I tried to step out of his arms, but he tightened his hold on me. I glared up at him and pushed against his strong, hard chest. “What are you doing?”

“If you’re fine, then you’ll have no problem breaking my hold,” he said.

I stopped resisting. “I don’t want to spar.” I was way too exhausted to keep up with him and the class we had just taught had used up all the energy I’d had left.

He shrugged with a tiny smirk. “Then I guess we could just stand here and talk. I happen to be a great listener.”

“Oh, really?” I drawled.

“Yup. We can talk about anything you want. I’ll be right here with open ears and zero judgment.”

That was super sweet, but I didn’t want to talk. I moved as fast as I could, hoping to catch him off guard, and dragged him to the ground. He was quick—quicker than I could keep up with at the moment—and he had me pinned on my back in two fluid moves.

Pinning my hands above my head, he didn’t look happy. “That was way too easy.”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” I said with zero bite as I relaxed under him.

He released one of my hands to put his beneath my head, snaking his fingers into my hair. “Maybe I should pull your hair?”

I didn’t react as he tugged a little. I just lay there staring up at him. I knew

he wanted me to fight back. I could see the pleading in his eyes.

His brow scrunched up as he let go of my hair. “I see you fading away, baby girl. You’re going fast and it’s scaring the shit out of me.”

I didn’t want to scare him. With my free hand, I reached up and cupped the back of his head, pulling him closer. He resisted at first, his worried eyes searching mine. Then he leaned down. I pressed my lips to his, needing to take his fear away and wanting to feel something other than tired and broken.

He pulled away with a pained expression. “I’m not going to fall for that again.”

I smiled a little. “I’m not trying to escape.”

“Yes, you are.” He brushed his thumb across my bottom lip. “You’re kissing me to drown out your demons.”

“No. I—”

“I know what it’s like to use someone as a distraction,” he cut me off. “I don’t want to be a distraction to you. I want you to kiss me because you want to kiss me.”

“I do want to kiss you.”

He looked so torn, his lips hovering inches above mine. “I’ve been where you are—I’ve been you in this situation—and I wish the other person stopped me.”

My eyes never leaving his, I asked, “What?”

“If I kiss you right now, you’ll soon find out that kissing isn’t enough to tune out the world. The next step is sex, and you’ll discover, for a short time, how good it’ll make you feel. To someone who feels like their life is falling apart, that’s appealing. But it’s just fucking. There’s no intimacy to it. Just two bodies riding each other until they reach the finish line.”

I blushed. Maybe I had tried to use him a little. Now that he’d pointed that out, I’d be sure to never do it again. I didn’t just want to have sex. I didn’t want sex like that with them. I wanted the passion and connection.

His eyes lit up with relief and he smiled as he stroked my cheek. “There you are.”

I huffed, trying not to smile.

Someone cleared their throat. We both looked up. Knox was staring down at us. He looked from me to Keelan.

Keelan grinned at his brother. “You still have no room to judge.”

“You could have picked a better place to do whatever it is that you two are doing,” Knox said, and it was then that I noticed he was carrying three

gym bags, one of them being mine.

Keelan's brows rose and he opened his mouth to argue.

"Don't bring up what happened in the kitchen," I said, knowing that was what he was going to throw back in Knox's face. I began trying to scoot out from underneath Keelan. He climbed off me and I was able to get to my feet. "I'm guessing it's time to go?" I asked Knox as I held my hand out for my bag.

Knox looked from my hand to me. "Go get your shoes."

I didn't argue and headed over to the cubbies.

After Keelan and I got our shoes on, the three of us made our way back to the front of the gym.

"Colt and Creed are going to meet us for dinner," Knox announced as we approached the front desk. Derek was still there, reclined back in the office chair with his fingers laced behind his head.

"Sounds good. Where are we eating?" Keelan asked.

When I didn't hear Knox answer, I glanced back at them over my shoulder. They stared at me expectantly.

"Where do you want to eat, baby girl?" Keelan asked.

I thought about it. "Somewhere I can get a milkshake."

"The diner by the house it is," Keelan said.

"Heading out?" Derek asked us as we walked by.

"Yeah, but before we go," Keelan said, grabbing my hand. "This is Shiloh. Shiloh, this is Derek. Derek will be manning the front desk until we can find a replacement."

Derek smiled at me. "We've met, actually."

"I've already talked to him," Knox said to Keelan.

It was my turn to look at them expectantly. I wanted to know what had happened to Stephanie.

Knox read what I wanted to know on my face and gestured for me to continue toward the exit. "We'll talk when we get home."

"I think you meant to say 'when we get in the car,'" I corrected and headed for the exit.

Keelan snorted behind me.

"Have a good night," Derek said. "And it was nice meeting you, Shiloh."

"You, too," I said with a wave as we walked out.

We all climbed into Keelan's Jeep and as soon as Keelan started the car, I asked, "Did you two fire her?"

“When we came in this morning, I found her letter of resignation on my desk,” Knox said.

That felt a little anticlimactic. “Good riddance.”

Keelan snorted. “I thought you said if you didn’t have anything nice to say, you wouldn’t say anything at all?”

Knox stared at Keelan with a pensive expression. “When has she ever done that?”

“That rule doesn’t apply to you,” I grumbled, making Keelan laugh and Knox roll his eyes. “And that was the least mean thing I could say about her.”

“Someone’s a little grumpy,” Keelan teased.

“She hasn’t slept in almost a week, what did you expect?” Knox snapped.

I closed my eyes, frustrated. I didn’t want to get into it with him. Thankfully, the remaining time in the car on the way to the diner was silent.

I STARTED MY DAY BY THROWING UP. I HAD DOZED OFF AROUND FOUR IN THE morning and startled awake about an hour later with my heart pounding and fear and exhaustion twisting up my stomach to the point I had to run to the toilet. It took smoking three cigarettes, one right after another, to stop myself from shaking and settle my nerves. That, plus a whole pot of coffee to give me the energy to shower and get ready for school.

I didn't bother doing my makeup or hair. I just put my red mane in a messy bun on top of my head. I literally grabbed a pair of jean shorts and a green top. The only thing I put thought into was my underwear choice. I picked my favorite Superman set.

I was tucking my anklet into my boot when I heard my front door open. "You ready, babe?" Colt asked as he came down the hall, toward my room.

I stood and grabbed my backpack. "Yeah."

Colt appeared in my doorway. I gave him a small smile as I hung the strap of my bag on one shoulder. His eyes bounced all over my face.

"I know I look like crap," I snapped before he could say anything and walked past him.

"Shiloh."

Shiloh, not *babe*? That alone told me I wasn't going to like what he had to say.

I stopped walking in my living room. "Please, Colt," I begged.

I felt him come up behind me. He wrapped one arm around me just below my neck and placed his other across my stomach. He pulled me until my back met his chest. "I don't know how much longer I can stand back and watch this." He pressed his lips to my temple. "I wish you'd talk to me."

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I said, pulling away and opening the front door.

“Are you that much in denial or do you think I’m stupid?” he snapped, his voice taking an angry tone he’d used with others but never with me.

I turned to face him. “I don’t want to fight with you—”

“I’m not trying to fight with you!” he bellowed, cutting me off. “I want you to fucking talk to me. You haven’t let Creed and I sleep over in almost a week. You’ve been pushing us away and lying every time we try to get you to talk to us. You. Are. Not. Fine. Stop telling us that. We can all see that you’re not and that something is wrong.”

I was so taken aback, I was at a loss for words.

He rubbed his hands down his face. “You’re not being fair. You’re making us watch you suffer and you won’t let us help you. How would you feel if one of us did that to you?”

He didn’t give me time to respond. He stormed past me and out the door, passing Creed, who I hadn’t known was standing on the porch. He had his hands stuffed in his pockets and he watched his brother pound down the steps and across my yard to his car parked in the street. Colt got in his blue Charger and sped off.

Creed sighed heavily. “We better get going or we’re going to be late.”

He wouldn’t meet my eyes. He didn’t offer words of encouragement. I didn’t know why I’d expected that—for him to coddle me. I deserved Colt’s anger. I deserved Creed’s frustration. I was a coward.

Creed didn’t speak to me the entire drive to school. He still walked with me inside, though. As we turned the corner in the hall, heading for Colt’s locker because that was where I’d kept my stuff since Cassy and her friends had graffitied mine, I slowed to a stop. Colt was at his locker, but he wasn’t alone. Amber was talking to him. She was smiling at him and flicked her platinum-blond hair. Colt’s arms were folded over his chest and his polite smile looked tight.

Creed stopped walking a few feet after I did and looked back at me. Then he followed my gaze and saw what I was watching. He shook his head. “That girl really doesn’t know how to take no for an answer.”

Just as he said that, Amber put her hand on Colt's bicep and moved closer to him. I dropped my backpack and my feet moved before I thought to move them. I stormed past Creed, my fist clenching at my side.

"Shi," Creed said as if to stop me, but it was too late.

As I approached them, I cocked my arm back. Amber barely had time to notice me before my fist connected with her cheek. She shrieked as she fell against the lockers and slid to the floor.

Arms wrapped around me from behind and dragged me away. My legs gave out and whoever had me had to bear my weight. I numbly watched as people swarmed around Amber, who was cupping her cheek and crying on the floor.

What did I just do?

"You're not going to offer me money to negotiate for a smaller sentence this time?" Principal Morgan said from where he sat behind his desk.

Mr. Morgan hadn't asked me what had happened when he'd called me into his office. Instead, he had greeted me with, "So much for letting them dig their own grave." Which I hadn't bothered responding to. We'd sat in silence for a while. He'd clearly been pondering what to do with me. I, on the other hand, just wanted to get my sentencing over with.

I was leaning all the way back in my chair, had my elbow resting on the armrest, and was propping up my head with my fist. "I could, but I'm not going to."

"And why is that?" he asked.

"I deserve to be punished."

His eyes narrowed as he studied me for a moment. "Is there something going on with you I should know about? I know you lost your family and that would be extremely hard on anyone, especially someone as young as you."

"No," I answered curtly.

He nodded tightly, clearly not happy with me. "Effective immediately, you're suspended for the rest of the school week."

I stood from my chair and scooped up my backpack from the floor. I had forgotten I hadn't driven to school until I walked out of Mr. Morgan's office and saw Knox waiting. He was standing in the middle of the small lobby of

the school's front office, with arms folded over his chest and a clenched jaw. He was wearing his work clothes.

"I'm going to take you home," he said.

I nodded and followed him out to the parking lot. The drive home was silent for the most part.

"Who called you?" I asked with my head leaning against the side window.

"Colt," he answered. "He told me what happened and that even if by some miracle you got yourself out of getting suspended, it would still be best if you went home." He glanced over at me. "By the looks of you, he was right."

"I got suspended for the rest of the week."

"Did you even try to fight it?"

"No."

His hand tightened around the steering wheel. I could tell he wanted to say something, but he stayed quiet until he pulled into his driveway. We both climbed out. As I headed for my house, I dug my keys out of my backpack. Knox intercepted me. He snatched my keys from my hand and took my backpack from my shoulder. I barely saw him swoop down and grab me by my legs. My feet were lifted off the ground and I was being carried over his shoulder.

"Knox," I grunted as I hung upside down.

He ignored me as he unlocked the front door of his house and carried me inside. He dropped my backpack by the small table just inside and tossed both of our sets of keys in the bowl. He took me all the way to his bedroom and set me on his bed.

Stunned, I watched him kneel in front of me and begin taking off my shoes and socks. He fiddled with my anklet. "On or off?"

"For what?" I asked.

He looked up at me. "You're going to sleep."

My panic spiked. "What?" I tried to scoot away from him, but he grabbed me by my ankles, holding me where I was.

"You're going to sleep, Shiloh. Even if I have to hold you down."

I shook my head. "I don't want to sleep."

"Why?"

I snapped my mouth shut.

He tugged on my anklet again. "On or off?"

“Why bother asking? It’s not like I have a say.”

“I recommend you get comfortable, because you’re not leaving this bed until you’ve gotten at least eight hours of sleep.”

I sighed frustratedly. “Off.”

He unclasped my anklet and stood to put it on his dresser. I reached behind me and under my shirt to unhook my bra, then pulled the straps off through the armholes and removed it entirely from the bottom of my shirt. I held my cobalt-blue and red Superman bra out to him. If he wanted me to get comfortable, I’d get comfortable.

He took it and tossed it on his dresser. I leaned back on the bed and unbuttoned my jean shorts and shimmied them down my thighs. His gaze followed my shorts as I pushed them down my legs. I kicked them off at the ankles and they flew in his direction. He caught them with a tight expression. I sat up to undo my bun and shake my hair out.

Knox set my shorts next to my bra. I froze when he undid his belt and toed off his shoes. I stopped breathing when he reached over his head and pulled off his shirt. I refused to blink as he unbuttoned his pants and stripped down to his tight, gray boxer briefs. He had a few tattoos. One on his hip that looked like script and another over his ribs on his side that was of a car engine wrapped in feathered angel wings. Beneath it was more script that I couldn’t read. I tried not to let my eyes drop lower. I tried and failed. As if drawn by a beacon, my gaze dropped and saw that his boxer briefs left very little to the imagination.

He put his hands on his hips and I knew I was caught. I blushed, my eyes traveling to his. He was frowning.

I rolled my eyes. “Like you didn’t get a long look at my vagina,” I muttered as I scooted back toward the pillows.

He opened his dresser and pulled out a pair of basketball shorts and a T-shirt. “I thought you wanted to pretend that didn’t happen.”

I climbed under the blankets. “You were giving me the *shame on you* look and needed to be called out.”

I saw the corner of his mouth twitch before he put his shirt on. “You could have averted your eyes.”

I scoffed. “*You* could have averted your eyes in the kitchen.”

He put on his basketball shorts before climbing into bed next to me. “I guess we’re even, then.”

“We’re far from even. You saw everything. All your bits were covered.”

He smiled, shaking his head, and got settled under the covers. Silence stretched between us as we both lay there. I stared at the ceiling, fighting back my fear.

“Close your eyes, Shiloh.”

My hands fisted his white comforter. “I can’t.”

“Why?”

My forehead scrunched and I had to bite my lip to keep it from wobbling. *I will not cry. I will not cry.*

“Hey,” he said, grabbing my chin. He made me turn my head to face him. “Why don’t you want to sleep?”

I shoved his hand away and returned to staring at the ceiling. I couldn’t stand to meet his concerned eyes.

“Shi—”

“I don’t want to have a nightmare, okay?” I finally admitted. “I don’t want to see him. I don’t want to be trapped in that house. Every time I go to sleep, I’m forced to go back there.” I covered my face. “I can’t do it anymore.” My voice broke but I kept the tears back.

The bed moved before he shoved his arm under me and dragged me to him. “Roll on your side,” he ordered.

I did as he said and shifted so I was lying on my side, facing away from him.

He scooted even closer until his body molded against mine. He stretched his arm under my head and draped his other across my stomach. “Do you feel me holding you?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Do you feel safe?”

“Yes.”

“I want you to close your eyes, but when you do, just focus on me,” he said.

I hesitated.

“Close your eyes, Shiloh.”

I slid my hand into his, squeezing it tightly before letting my eyes close.

His hand that was resting near my stomach moved up to my head and his fingers began running through my hair. “You’re going to relax because I have you.”

“What if I have a nightmare?”

“I’ll wake you if you do, but try not to think about that. I just want you to

focus on me,” he said as he continued to run his fingers through my hair. “Nothing can get to you while I’m holding you. No one can hurt you.”

I took a deep breath and relaxed a little as I exhaled.

“There you go,” he said. His fingers never stopped stroking and combing through my hair. I focused solely on the feel of them and how good it felt.

I quickly found myself on the edge of drifting off. “My mother used to run her fingers through my hair,” I said sleepily. She’d done it to calm me and it had always worked, just like it was working now.

I thought I heard him say, “I know,” just before I tumbled off the edge and fell into a dark pit of sleep.

MR. X BEGAN HUMMING AS HE MADE HIS WAY DOWN THE HALL TOWARD MY ROOM. I worked quickly to untie my other wrist as I listened to him getting closer. Once my other hand was free, I glanced down at my tied ankles. I wouldn't be able to untie them in time. Panicked, I searched around. There was a pen on my nightstand. I reached for it. My fingers were barely able to roll it close enough to scoop it into my hand.

Moving as fast as I could, I wrapped the rope back around each wrist, praying that he wouldn't notice that they weren't tied. I hid the pen in my clenched fist behind the taut rope. My gaze went back to the doorway just in time to see Shayla's feet slide away.

My hand that wasn't holding the pen squeezed around the rope so tightly it was painful. I needed that pain. I needed it to be worse than the fear that was threatening to paralyze me.

Mr. X stepped into view. Only he wasn't alone. He was holding Shayla's limp body against him with an arm around her waist and his hand held one of hers. Then he waltzed into my room, quite literally. Still humming, he spun around—dancing with her lifeless body. As he dipped her, he said, "Your sister always was the attention whore." He stood straight and stared down at Shayla, whose head flopped around like a newborn baby's. "Even though you two are identical, you couldn't be more different." He spun around again, swinging Shayla with him. "She flaunted herself about, gobbling up every ounce of attention she got like a greedy, spoiled princess. She may have been beautiful on the outside, but her soul was ugly." He tossed Shayla's body to the ground and his eyes flicked to me. "You, however, are perfection. Inside and out. You don't have to flaunt anything. Your soul radiates a genuine and

pure light. It calls to me.” He walked over to my bed. Eyes never leaving mine, he brought his knee up onto the mattress. “Your innocence draws me in like a moth to a flame,” he said as he crawled over me until he was straddling my hips. His hands cupped my face. “I covet that innocence.” His hands moved down and around my neck. “I want it so bad...” He squeezed. “I almost want to destroy it.”

He cut off my air completely. Panic surged through me, taking over. I thrashed and bucked beneath him, almost forgetting that my hands were free. I quickly worked to unravel them.

“You are mine, Shiloh. No one can take you from me now,” he growled as he continued to choke me.

*I got the rope off my hand holding the pen. **Do it! Do it now!** I screamed internally. Fisting the pen in my hand, I swung it. I stabbed the pen through his cheek.*

“AH!” he screamed, rolling off of me and off the bed. He hit the ground with a loud thump that shook my room. I didn’t waste any time and started untying the rope around my ankles. I got one untied pretty quickly, then jumped to the next one. He groaned loudly and crawled toward the bathroom connected to my room.

As soon as I had my last ankle untied, I quickly clambered off my bed. I jumped over Shayla’s body and ran for the door. I was caught by my foot and fell forward. The moment I hit the ground, I was dragged back.

I woke, gasping.

Hands framed my face. “Shiloh,” a voice barked firmly, capturing my attention.

Looking up, I saw Knox above me, and I felt relieved.

“You’re alright,” he said.

I pushed on his chest, needing space. He sat back on his haunches and I sat up against the headboard, pulling my knees to my chest. “They’re never going to go away.”

His hard expression softened. “Only you have the ability to make them go away, Shiloh.”

I knew where he was going with that and I didn’t want to hear it. I

climbed off the bed and grabbed my shorts from the dresser.

“You only slept five hours,” Knox said, climbing off the bed. “You need to sleep more than that.”

I yanked my shorts up my legs and buttoned them. “No.”

“Shiloh,” he grumbled.

I ignored him and stormed toward the door.

As I was walking down the hall, toward the living room, Knox’s angry voice sounded right behind me. “What’s the plan, then? Go another week refusing to fucking sleep?”

“Hey, now,” Keelan said, walking into the living room from the dining room. He appeared a little surprised as he looked from me to Knox behind me.

“How I choose to deal is my business,” I snapped over my shoulder.

My wrist was grabbed, and I was yanked around. Knox stared down at me with fury burning in his eyes. “That’s the thing. You aren’t dealing with anything.”

I yanked my wrist free.

“You’re spiraling, Shiloh. If you don’t fucking admit it and let us help you, we’re done,” Knox said.

His threat almost knocked me off my feet.

“You don’t get to decide that for us,” I heard Creed snap. I glanced across the room and saw him and Colt standing by the hall that led to their side of the house.

I looked back at Knox. His angry gaze was fixed on me. “I will not sit back and watch you hurt my brothers because you refuse to help yourself.”

I stumbled back a step. His words really did feel like physical blows to my soul.

He was right. I was hurting them. I’d seen it this morning when I’d heard the pain in Colt’s voice.

I was hurting them because I was a coward.

I deserved this.

Creed argued with Knox. I could see them shouting back and forth at each other, but I couldn’t hear them. Not over the booming in my ears. My feet numbly moved away from them. I grabbed my keys from the bowl and walked out the door. I felt a little bit of pain under my bare feet as I walked home, but it was the tightness in my chest that held most of my attention. It was so tight, I couldn’t pull enough air into my lungs. Pressure began to

pulsate behind my eyes and face, making me feel dizzy.

My legs gave out on me just as I reached the steps of my porch. Down I went and I smacked my head on the bottom step. The pain shocked me—shocked my lungs open, and I was able to suck in air with a long gasp. I brought my hand to my temple as I pushed myself back to my feet. I felt a tear in my skin. I pulled my hand away and something wet rolled down the side of my face and down my neck. I looked at my hand. It was covered in blood.

I went up the steps and unlocked the door. I struggled for a second getting the door open. My bloody hand kept slipping around the knob. Once inside, I disarmed and rearmed the alarm, my bloody fingers leaving smeared prints on the keys. Blood dripped off my face onto the wood floor by my toes.

I stared at the dots, wondering if this was all I was ever going to know. Blood and never-ending pain. If so, I didn't want to do this anymore.

Why had I fought so hard?

I couldn't remember the reason, or the strength I'd conjured that night.

Where had it gone?

My chest became tight again.

I was scared.

I needed my mom.

I ran to my bedroom and ripped open my closet. I crawled all the way to the back corner, under a section of hanging clothes. I brought my knees to my chest and I gave up.

“SHILOH?” MY MOM CALLED BEFORE MY CLOSET DOOR OPENED. SHE SPOTTED me sitting all the way in the back, my knees tucked to my chest. “What are you doing in here?” she asked as she bent over to look at me, concern etched around her eyes.

“I feel like I can’t breathe,” I said.

“Oh, honey,” she said, kneeling down and grabbing my hand. “Come here.” She pulled me to her and wrapped her arms around me.

“I don’t know how much longer I can do this,” I cried into her shoulder.

“Don’t say that.”

“I feel like he’s always watching me. Like I can’t get free. Why won’t he leave me alone?!”

Her arms squeezed so tight around me and I thought I heard her snuffle. Her chest shook as she exhaled. “Listen to me,” she said, grabbing my shoulders and making me look at her. She looked determined and fierce. Only the slight pink tint in her eyes showed she might have been crying. “If you give up, he wins. We can’t let him win. You are strong enough to withstand this.”

“I don’t think I am.”

She looked up at the ceiling as if trying to regain her composure. When she looked down at me again, that determined look returned. “I know you are because I made you. Life will constantly lay heavy shit on your shoulders in order to knock you down.”

I gaped at hearing her curse.

She gave me a tiny smile. “You will fall. You will fall many times. Sometimes the fall will hurt more than you ever thought possible and you will

feel like you don't want to get back up. Like right now, for example. But you will, and when you do, you will be stronger."

"You make it sound so easy." I wiped my face.

"I know it's not," she said, stroking the back of my head.

"Have you ever fallen and absolutely could not get back up?" I asked her.

She got a sad look in her eye and nodded.

"Then how did you get back up?"

"Your father helped me."

"What am I supposed to do if I ever reach that point?"

She got to her feet and held out her hand. "Then I'll help you, honey."

I opened my eyes to the sound of Knox's voice. "She reset the alarm. That means she's in the house somewhere."

"Is she in this room? The one that's locked?" I heard Keelan say before I heard banging. "Shiloh!"

I didn't move. I didn't respond. I just lay there with my cheek resting on the cold wood floor. I was completely numb, inside and out.

"There's blood on the floor in her bedroom," I heard Knox say just before my closet door was ripped open and I saw his shoes. "I found her!" he shouted and rushed in. He knelt next to me. "Shiloh?"

"Go away," I whispered.

He moved some of my hair away from my face and let out a curse. "What happened?"

"Please, go away," I whispered again.

"Where are you?" Colt yelled from my bedroom before the closet door was opened wider. "Is she alright?"

I could hear his worry and it took away some of the numbness. Fresh tears filled my eyes.

"Colt, take Creed and go get the first aid kit from home," Knox ordered.

"Why do we both have to go?" I heard Creed ask. "Is she alright? I want to see her."

"Damnit!" Knox roared. "Do as I say and go."

"Come on," Colt said, and I heard footsteps retreating.

“What can I do?” I heard Keelan ask.

“Just keep them back.”

“She’s their girlfriend, Knox,” Keelan said.

“That doesn’t fucking matter right now,” Knox snapped and shifted to sit next to me. He brushed more of my hair away from my face. “Shiloh.” His voice took on a gentleness I couldn’t stand.

I closed my eyes. “Please, go.”

“You know I can’t do that. You’re pretty banged up.”

I don’t care.

“How did this happen?” he asked.

“I fell.”

“Did you lose consciousness?”

I opened my eyes and tears rolled out. “If it was more than just a cut, I think it would have killed me by now.”

Knox was quiet for a few breaths. “Were you hoping that would happen? Is that why you came in here instead of getting it looked at?”

I’d come in here because I needed to feel safe, but what did it matter?

“Shiloh,” he admonished.

“I don’t want to care anymore.” More tears leaked from my eyes. “So please, just go.”

“You’re giving up?”

“I’m wondering why I didn’t do it sooner,” I admitted. “Why did I fight so hard to escape him? He killed them. I had nothing left.”

“You wanted to live.”

“I didn’t know it would be this hard.” My voice broke as my pain rushed in, washing away the numbness completely.

“It will get easier,” he said. “If you give up, you’ll never see that.”

I didn’t believe him. “Prove it.”

He went quiet for a while. Just when I thought he was about to give up and leave, he said, “I was thirteen when my mom died from lung cancer. She never smoked a day in her life.”

I hadn’t expected him to say that. The guys never really talked about their mother. All I really knew about her was that she had passed away when Colt and Creed had been six and Knox and Keelan had her eyes.

“Months before she passed, she became bedridden and was hooked up to an oxygen concentrator that made this constant vibrating noise,” Knox continued and there was a slight strain to his voice. “It was so loud it could be

heard everywhere in our old home. I couldn't tune it out and when I went to school, the sound refused to leave my head. I hated it." He paused. To compose himself, maybe? I wasn't sure. I couldn't see his face. "The sound was a constant reminder that my mother was going to die and my world was falling apart." He scooted so he could lie down on his back and we were finally talking face-to-face. "I'm not telling you this so I can say I understand what you're going through. But with my loss, I know what it's like for every minute of every day to feel hard with no ending in sight."

"How did you keep going?"

"I struggled. I avoided dealing with my grief in ways that hurt me, like you do. I was angry all the time. I got into fights a lot. My dad made me play football, hoping that it would be a better outlet. It helped, until it didn't. I eventually got kicked off the team for excessive aggression. After that, I lived at the gym. I ran, lifted weights, I worked my body until I could barely stand. My sophomore year of high school, my dad brought home an old car that looked like it came from a junkyard. He told me he wasn't going to pay for my gym membership, phone, or anything else anymore unless I helped him fix it up. I threatened to get a job to pay for my own shit and he threatened to kick me out of the house if I did. 'Work on the damn car with me, Knox, and when we're done you can have it,' he said to me." Knox's eyes were sad. "I hadn't realized at the time, but working on that car was how he got me to work through my grief. At first, he subtly brought up my mom, just a comment here or there. Then he brought her up more and more, sharing his memories of when they first met, when he knew he loved her. I couldn't tell you when or how it became okay for me to talk about her, but I eventually let my grief out under the hood of that car."

"He saved you," I said.

"He saved me from myself," he answered. "Then I lost him and all the progress I'd made felt like it was washed away in an instant. I wanted to give up. I wanted to do what you're doing right now. I wanted to say 'fuck it' so badly, but then I remembered I had three people depending on me. It was the hardest thing I had ever done—refusing to succumb to my pain. What helped me a lot was knowing that it would get easier. My dad had showed me that."

"I don't have anyone depending on me."

"You don't, and the fact that you've made it this far is a testament to your strength."

I sniffled. "I'm not strong. I've made it this long because I've been

jumping from one crutch to another. Drowning myself in the bottom of a bottle. Smoking to calm my fear. Running until it hurt because that pain was better than what I was feeling.”

“If you’re aware that what you’re doing is wrong, why do you continue to do it to yourself? Why haven’t you tried to work on getting better?” There wasn’t judgment in his question. Just the need to understand.

My forehead scrunched up. “Because I’m scared.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“I—” A dam inside me broke and tears began to fall rapidly down my cheeks. “I don’t want to talk about what happened. I don’t want to remember how he hurt me and how he killed them.” My body shook as I cried uncontrollably.

His expression turned pained and he grabbed my hand. “Come here.” He tugged a little and I pushed myself up. He sat up and pulled me onto his lap. I swung my leg over his thighs, straddling him. I tucked my arms in and buried my face in his bulky chest like I did when Colt held me like this.

Knox held me tightly. “I know you don’t want to talk about it, but that night is catching up with you in your dreams. I told you before that we all have to face our pain. Maybe your subconscious is telling you it’s time whether you want to talk about that night or not. So you gotta ask yourself... would talking about it and trying to work through what you went through make things any worse than they already are?”

I shook my head. “I’m not brave enough to do it.”

“Look at me,” he said, putting his hand under my chin. I met his brown eyes. “You’re brave enough. You were brave enough to sleep today.”

“I was only brave enough because you were holding me.”

His hands cupped my cheeks. “Then I’ll hold you. We’ll all hold you, Shiloh. I said we would help you, but you have to want to help yourself.”

Could I do this? Alone, no. I was drowning alone—slowly sinking to the bottom of the ocean, because I had given up. The thought of their help was as if their hands were reaching into the water for me. “I need to go back to therapy.”

He went still. “I think that’s a good idea.”

I closed my eyes. “Can I ask you for two favors?”

“What?”

“Don’t go easy on me. Don’t let me slip up, because I don’t want to be back here. I don’t ever want to feel this way again.”

He dropped his hands from my face. “We can all help with that. What’s the second favor?”

“Today, even though I knew what I would face when I fell asleep, you made me feel like everything was going to be okay. Can you do that again?”

He nodded and pushed my hair behind my shoulder. Pointing at my temple, he said, “We should really take you to get this looked at.” Knox bound his arm around my lower back and climbed to his feet without letting me go. To help him hold me and because I was scared I was going to fall, I quickly wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. He carried me out of the closet, and I saw Colt, Creed, and Keelan all waiting in my room. Creed was leaning against my dresser with his arms folded across his chest, Colt was sitting on the floor by the closet door, and Keelan was sitting on the foot of my bed. All of them wore somber expressions, but perked up as Knox carried me past them to my bathroom. With one arm under my butt to hold me up, he used his free hand to flick on the light before setting me on the counter.

I winced at the bright light. Knox gently brushed my hair back from my temple. “Yup. You’re going to need stitches.”

“I don’t want to go to the hospital,” I said.

“You need to go, baby girl,” Keelan said from where he stood by the bathroom door. The muscles in his jaw clenched as he stared at my temple.

“Alright, let’s get her some shoes and grab her purse,” Knox said to Keelan and the two of them walked out of the bathroom. As soon as they passed the threshold, Colt and Creed barreled their way in.

Colt got to me first. His hands wrapped around the back of my neck and he slammed his lips on mine. “You’re not allowed to do that again,” he said, pulling away. He took in the side of my face with a curse.

I nodded. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “Just don’t shut us out. You are not alone anymore. You suffer, we suffer.”

“Okay,” I said.

Keelan returned with a pair of sandals from my closet. As he handed them to Creed, his eyes met mine. “How would you feel about staying with us for a few days?”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Creed said and the three of them looked at me expectantly.

I had a knee-jerk reaction to say no. I had become so used to running

away—not wanting them to see me continue to make poor decisions. “I’ll need to pack some stuff.”

“I can do that for you,” Keelan said, backing out of the bathroom.

“She’ll want her Batman pajamas. They’re her favorite,” Creed told Keelan before he could get too far. “She loves to wear dresses and she has a pile of new hair tie things on her dresser. You’ll need to pack all of them because she loses them left and right. I swear I found, like, six of them in my truck yesterday.”

Colt snorted. “She keeps a stash of them in my locker and I’ve lost count of how many I’ve found in my car.”

If it weren’t stupidly hot here all the time, I wouldn’t feel the need to constantly put my hair up. I almost smiled. Creed was right...about everything. I loved my Batman PJs. I’d worn them the morning I’d first made him breakfast. I thought that was why I favored them. Every time I saw them, I thought of him. And I did love to wear dresses. They made me feel pretty and they were a lot more comfortable to wear in the heat.

Keelan looked at Creed. “Do you want to help me pack?”

Creed handed my sandals to Colt and left with Keelan. Colt pushed my hair off my shoulder. His eyes followed the trail of dried blood down the side of my face to the top of my green shirt. “Let’s get you cleaned up a little before we go.”

I ENDED UP WITH FOUR STITCHES ALONG MY HAIRLINE BY MY TEMPLE. THE only plus side was the fact I could hide my Frankenstein look with my hair and the drugs they gave me at the hospital. Colt had held my hand the entire time while Keelan had praised me, calling me a “total badass” because I hadn’t even flinched when the doctor had started sewing me up.

During the drive home, the pain meds fully kicked in and were making me really sleepy. I could feel the guys watching me as my eyes repeatedly slid closed and I startled awake a minute later. None of them suggested I sleep. They didn’t utter a word until we arrived back home. They all climbed out of Keelan’s Jeep with ease. My movements were sluggish and it took me longer than it should have to get my seat belt off. Knox opened my door and scooped me up. Keelan got their front door opened and Knox carried me in. Without stopping, he took me to his room and laid me on the bed. I kicked off my sandals, letting them drop off the side of the bed to the floor, and curled up on my side.

“I get that this is what’s best for her, but tomorrow, I want you to tell me what you said or did to help her sleep,” I heard Creed say from the hall in a low voice.

“I’ll tell you everything in the morning,” Knox whispered, irritation riding his voice. “Until then, keep your jealousy under wraps. She doesn’t need that right now.”

“I’m not jealous. I’m worried about her,” Creed whispered back. “Don’t lead her on only to pull away because you think it’s for the best.”

“I won’t,” Knox said.

“I’m serious, Knox,” Creed said, not bothering to be quiet anymore.

“Enough,” Keelan said. “Let’s call it a night. Colt, Creed, go to bed. You have school in the morning and it’s late.”

I could hear Creed grumbling as he moved down the hall. Someone touched me on my shoulder, and I opened my eyes. Keelan was standing next to the bed with the bag he’d packed for me. “Here’s your stuff if you want to change into your pajamas.”

I nodded and sat up. Keelan set my bag on the bed and left the room. I unzipped it and pulled out my Batman PJs. I hung my feet off the side of the bed with a sigh. I was dreading the walk to the bathroom. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Knox standing on the other side of the bed, watching me.

“Don’t look,” I said tiredly and pulled my shirt over my head.

“You’re supposed to give me time to turn around,” he grumbled.

All he could see was my back. My bare back, because I wasn’t wearing a bra. I hadn’t had one on since I’d taken it off to nap with him earlier. “I’m too tired to care,” I said as I pulled my pajama top on. I lay back in the bed as I had done earlier and took my shorts off. I just kicked them to the floor and then put my Batman bottoms on. After I was changed, I dropped my bag on the floor and climbed under the blankets.

I listened to Knox move around the room before he got into bed. As soon as he was under the blankets, he pulled me close. He put his arm under my head. “What do you need?”

I put my hand in his and laced our fingers. “Make me feel safe.”

His fingers began to comb through my hair. “No one can get to you,” he said with a confidence that made me believe him. “No one can hurt you when you’re in my arms. I have you, Shiloh.”

I let myself relax and before I knew it, I had fallen asleep.

Shayla held her hand over my mouth as we listened to Mr. X grunt each time he stabbed our mom’s body. I had watched him stab her the first handful of times before Shayla had pulled me back behind the couch and covered my mouth when I’d let out a tiny strangled noise in order to stop myself from screaming.

She held me tightly. I could feel her whole body shaking and hear her heart pounding in her chest.

Mr. X let out a roar that made us both jump. We held our breath, listening to him. His feet shuffled on the wood floor as he moved around the room. "Shiloh! Come out! Come out, wherever you are!"

I jerked awake, surrounded by darkness. Arms tightened around me and Knox's voice filled my ear. "Shh, I've got you."

I rolled over so I was facing him, not caring that I was lying on my stitches.

He ran his hand up and down my spine. "Try to go back to sleep," he said tiredly.

I took in a shuddering breath, trying to calm my pounding heart.

Knox leaned forward and kissed my forehead. "Close your eyes."

I did, and I eventually fell back to sleep.

The morning light woke me and my chest caved in a little with relief. I hadn't had another nightmare after falling back to sleep.

I closed my eyes, thanking whatever higher power would listen for letting me have a few hours of dreamless sleep. As I went to stretch, I finally became aware that something wasn't right. I was still wrapped up in Knox's arms, facing him, but with my head tucked under his chin. It appeared that my hand was the only body part of mine that had decided to do some wandering last night.

My hand had found its way into not only his shorts, but also his boxers, and I was holding his... *Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no, no, no.* My hand just twitched around him and the rest of his body went stiff. My cheeks were on fire. "You're awake, aren't you?"

"Yup." There wasn't any grogginess in his voice, which told me he was wide awake.

I started to pull my hand out of his boxers, my fingers running up his length. He inhaled sharply and he twitched against my hand. I froze. His chest rose and fell with shallow breaths. I tilted my head back so I could see his face. I found his eyes squeezed shut and a pained look furrowing his

brow. He was hard in my hand. Hard like his muscles became when he flexed them. If he was hard down there, didn't that mean...

I moved my hand back down his length and curled my fingers around him at the tip.

His eyes shot open and bored into mine. "Shiloh," he growled.

I stroked up and the backs of my fingers brushed his balls. "Do you want me to stop?" I asked as I moved my hand down again.

His hips bucked. "Fuck."

He didn't stop me. Instead, he fisted the back of my shirt. I couldn't get enough of how he reacted to me touching him. This big, strong man was at my mercy. "Am I doing it right?"

"Harder." His voice was like rumbling thunder. I did as he said, and his breath hitched. "That's it."

The corner of my mouth twitched as I fought a smug smile. His eyes dropped there, catching the twitch, and he released the back of my shirt. He moved his hand up into my hair and tugged a little. He wasn't hurting me, but it toed the line, making me gasp. "Do you like touching my cock, Shiloh?"

Oh, he wasn't the one in control here. I was. And I would fight him for it if I had to. "I think you like it more." I pumped my hand faster and he tightened his grip on my hair. "You're bigger than I thought."

He inched his face closer until his lips hovered above mine. "You've thought about my cock?"

I only smiled.

He grinned back. "I haven't stopped thinking about your pretty little pussy." His lips lightly brushed mine, but he didn't fully kiss me. That frustrated me a little because it still felt like he had the upper hand.

"I haven't stopped thinking about the way you looked at me," I said. "You wanted me, and I wanted you to have me right there on that counter."

He let out a breathy groan and started rocking his hips in sync with my hand. I felt him swell just before he let out a curse and warmth coated my fingers.

I pulled my hand from his boxers and watched his cum roll down my fingers. Curiosity urged me to taste it, but as I brought my hand toward my mouth, Knox caught my wrist. Pushing me onto my back, he pinned my hand against the pillow.

"Fuck," he cursed, squeezing his eyes shut. "I shouldn't have let that happen."

“What?” I said and hated how hurt I sounded.

Hearing it, his eyes shot open and his brow furrowed. “You’re going through a lot right now. It was wrong—”

“Wrong?” I blurted and pushed him off of me. I climbed out of the bed, beelining for the bathroom to wash my hands in the sink. By the time I was done and walked back in the bedroom, Knox was sitting on the edge of the bed, hunched over, with his face in his hands.

I folded my arms over my chest. “I know I’ve made piss-poor decisions regarding my grief and I may be inexperienced in the bedroom, but that doesn’t mean you can write me off as incompetent. I do know better and I’m still capable of making good decisions.”

He looked up with a frown.

“I woke up this morning peacefully. Yes, I had a nightmare last night, but I was able to fall back to sleep and I didn’t dream. I opened my eyes feeling somewhat normal and...” I sighed frustratedly, trying to organize my thoughts. “Keelan already explained why I shouldn’t use sex as an escape and I won’t. What we just did...that wasn’t an escape. I didn’t use you.”

“I don’t think you used me,” he snapped.

“Then what is it?”

“You should be focusing on yourself right now,” he said firmly. “Sex could distract you from that.”

“I’m not some sex-crazed teenager who can’t control their hormones. Well, there was this one time with the twins, and I was drunk, but that doesn’t count,” I rambled. I needed to get back on track. “I have feelings for you and I’m pretty sure you have feelings for me, too. It’s normal to want to connect with you on an intimate level. If you didn’t want that, then you should have said something. I wouldn’t have done what I did—”

“If I hadn’t wanted that to happen, it wouldn’t have. That’s not the point. We need to do right by you. Sex needs to wait until you’re in a better place.”

We? They all came to this decision without talking to me?

My eyes dropped to the floor and I headed for the door. “I’m going to make breakfast.”

“Shiloh,” he said, but I ignored him as I left.

By the time I made it to the kitchen, I felt ready to combust. I pulled food from the fridge and dropped it all on the counter next to the stove. I slammed cabinets closed and plopped pans on the stove, not caring how loud I was. The drawers were the next to suffer my wrath as I searched for utensils. I

tossed those on the counter and enjoyed the way they clanged and clattered.

“Babe?”

I turned around, finding Colt, Creed, and Keelan standing on the opposite end of the kitchen. All of them were shirtless, looking like they had just rolled out of bed. They were staring at me, gaping.

Colt took a cautious step forward. “Everything alright?”

I turned back toward the stove and grabbed some eggs from the carton. “I know I hit rock bottom yesterday and I’m mortified that you all had to see that, but that doesn’t mean you all have to walk on eggshells around me.” I was so angry in my cracking of the eggs that all the yolks broke when they hit the pan. *Scrambled eggs it is.* I took a spatula and mixed the raw eggs around the pan.

“Okay,” Creed drawled.

I whirled back around and pointed the spatula at them. “And you don’t get to decide what’s best for me without talking to me first, because at the end of the day, I know what I’m ready for or what I can handle. Not any of you.”

All of their brows had risen. Knox walked in at that moment, with his hands stuffed in his pockets. He had different basketball shorts on. His eyes zeroed in on me and the muscles in his jaw ticked. There was nothing I could do to stop myself from glaring at him. So I spun back around and returned to cooking eggs that were already burned.

“Fuck it,” I cursed as I turned off the burner and tossed the spatula into the sink. I faced them all again. “It bothers me that you all had a conversation about sharing me without me. None of you thought to include me in the decision-making or asked me if I was alright being in a relationship with all of you.”

They were all clearly stunned.

“Did you discuss fucking me, too?” I questioned.

That snapped them out of their stunned states and Colt and Creed both said “no” at the same time. Knox smartly stayed quiet. Keelan looked from me to Knox as if he held the answer to what was happening.

“So none of you talked about halting all intimacy with me because the four of you assumed I can’t handle it right now?” I asked.

I was answered with silence.

“Wow.” My voice cracked. “Am I really that pathetic to you?” How could they not see me that way? I’d just had a meltdown in my closet

yesterday.

“What?” Creed shook his head. “No.”

“Then why don’t you include me when it involves me?” I asked.

Again, I was answered with silence.

“I’m not someone who needs to be managed or told how things are going to be because the four of you think you know best. If that’s what you expect, I can’t do this,” I said and moved to leave.

Colt quickly blocked me. “We just didn’t want to add any pressure on you.”

“None of you have made me feel pressured in that department,” I said. “But you’d know that if you talked to me.” I could read what Colt was going to say next and I spoke first. “And before you say that I haven’t been the easiest to talk to, that was when you were trying to get me to talk about not sleeping. I have never avoided talking about our relationship. In fact, I have asked you to talk to me about it.” I looked at Creed. I’d asked him at Ethan’s party.

“What about what we discussed the other day?” Keelan asked in a calm voice.

“You couldn’t trust me not to use you?” I asked him. “Life is supposed to have give and take. In my case it’s almost always take, but my time with any of you, be it intimate or just being in your company, has been the only give life has allotted me. I wasn’t going to ruin the one fucking good thing I had.”

“Have,” Creed corrected.

“Had,” I repeated. “You made me feel like I don’t have a voice in this relationship. What’s good about that?” I walked around Colt and headed back to Knox’s room. I stuffed everything that had fallen out of my bag back in and grabbed my anklet tracker, which I’d left on Knox’s dresser yesterday. As I went to zip my bag shut, I felt my regular cell phone vibrate from somewhere inside.

I quickly dug around to retrieve it. Of course it was all the way at the bottom of the bag. The lock screen lit up, showing I had a text message from an unknown number. I clicked on the message and my heart stopped.

I KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE.

I RAN OUT OF THE GUYS' HOUSE, MY BAG BOUNCING AGAINST ME EACH TIME my feet hit the ground. I hit the unlock button on my key fob as I ran toward my car.

"Shiloh!" I heard Creed yell, followed by the sound of shoes pounding on the ground behind me.

I whirled around. "Stop!"

He froze about a few yards from me. "You can't just leave, Shi."

Colt came outside next and walked briskly toward me.

"Please stay back," I ordered with my hand out. I looked out at the street, searching for any sign that Mr. X was nearby. The hair on the back of my neck had been standing up since I'd seen the text.

"Why do you look scared?" Colt asked.

I looked back at them. If they knew, they wouldn't let me go. If I stayed, he'd kill them to get to me. "I need some space." I took a step back.

"You don't need space. We need to work through our shit," Creed snapped as he took a step forward.

"Please just give me some time," I begged as I took another step back.

Colt studied me intently. "What's going on, babe? You're not acting right."

"Maybe Knox is right. Maybe I need to just focus on me right now." I hated the words the moment they left my mouth.

"Fuck Knox!" Creed snapped. "I want to know exactly what he did to fuck everything up."

"Creed," Colt said sullenly.

"Don't start with me," Creed seethed at his twin. "Our girlfriend came out

of his bedroom madder than I've ever seen her. I want to know what went down. I want to know why they were talking about sex."

They both looked at me and I tried to not let anything show on my face.

"Did you have sex with him, Shi?" Creed asked.

Would a hand job be considered some form of sex?

"Holy shit." Creed gaped and I realized my lack of response had made him draw his own conclusion.

"I'm still a virgin, Creed," I said.

Creed looked relieved. Colt, on the other hand, narrowed his eyes. "You two still did something."

"Why don't you go and ask him?" I snapped and moved to leave.

"We're not done, Shi," Creed said.

"Yes, we are!" I bellowed. I needed to leave. "Just give me some space."

Colt looked defeated. "Will you check in, so we know you're alright?"

I nodded.

Colt grabbed Creed's arm and a look passed between them. "Let her go," Colt said.

Creed jerked his arm from Colt's grasp and stormed back into their house.

"I'll check in later," I said before Colt could say anything more and I went to my car. He watched me climb in, back out of my driveway, and drive away.

I kept looking in my rearview mirror as I tried not to speed through the neighborhood.

What am I going to do? I kept asking myself over and over.

At a stop sign, I reached into my bag and grabbed my phone. I quickly looked at the time the text had been sent to me and saw that it had been sent last night around ten. We'd gotten home around ten. That meant he'd probably seen me be carried into the guys' house. If he knew about the guys...

Oh, no.

I needed to call Logan. I clicked the phone app and scrolled through it for his number. Once I found it, my finger hovered over it. What if the text was a wrong number? What if it was a trap to get Logan to come out here and show Mr. X where I was?

I tossed my phone on the passenger's seat and slammed my hands on the steering wheel. Something flipped inside me and all I could feel was rage. I let loose a roar and slammed my hands on the wheel again and again. I

embraced the hurt in my palms, let it travel up my arms, and expelled it with my screams. I didn't stop until I was hoarse.

I sat there breathing laboriously and I thought of a plan. I couldn't leave the guys. If Mr. X had seen me with them, he might kill them or use them to lure me out if I ran.

Mind made up, I grabbed my phone from where I'd thrown it. I pulled up the message again and typed a reply.

THEN COME AND FUCKING GET ME.

I turned the wheel and went back home. After I parked in my driveway, I reached under my seat and pulled out a 9mm I had tucked under it. Next, I reached back in my bag and grabbed my anklet tracker. I fastened it around my ankle before I climbed out of my car. I hid my gun between my body and my bag as I walked toward my front door. I stayed alert until I got the door unlocked and went inside.

The alarm beeped, which I took as a good sign. I quickly tossed my bag on the couch and went to disarm the alarm. My fingers hesitated for a second at the sight of dried blood on the keys. I shook my head. Now wasn't the time to think about last night. I put in the code to disarm it and rearmed it again.

Clutching my gun in both hands, I crept through each room and looked in every closet. I even looked under my bed and behind my shower curtains in both bathrooms. When I felt satisfied that no one was in the house, I went to each window and door and double-checked they were all locked. I went into the panic room and turned on the two computer monitors. Boxes appeared, splitting the screens. Each box showed where a camera was pointed around the entire house. There wasn't a blind spot and even my car was in direct view of a camera.

It became a waiting game after that.

I checked in with Colt a lot despite being upset, but I needed to know they were alright. Around eleven that night, my phone beeped, notifying me of a text. I was currently camped out on the floor in the panic room with a bunch of pillows and blankets. I paused Iron Chef on my computer and picked up my phone. It was the unknown number again. I clicked it, and after I read it, relief washed through me.

Oh I'm coming for u bitch. U better watch ur back.

It wasn't from Mr. X. I was pretty sure it was Cassy or Amber or both, seeing how they'd spelled the word *you*. I tossed my phone on the floor and relaxed back against my pillows, laughing. It wasn't funny in the slightest. I rubbed my hands down my face as my eyes filled with tears. I let two escape before pulling myself together.

I turned Iron Chef back on, but I couldn't pay attention. My mind was racing with what had happened today—how I had acted. I turned off Iron Chef and pulled up my email. I typed in Dr. Bolton's, my old psychiatrist's, email. I wrote to her saying that I needed to come back and I hoped she would take me back. I inhaled deeply and exhaled through pursed lips. "Here goes," I said, hitting send.

If I could take away one good thing from today, it would be that I'd found my strength again.

DR. BOLTON SQUEEZED ME IN THE NEXT DAY VIA TELECONFERENCE. I WAS grateful because I hadn't slept a wink last night.

"Hello, Shiloh," she said as she appeared on my computer. She was an elderly woman who reminded me of the actress Helen Mirren. Her hair was snow white and pulled back into an elegant French twist. She wore square-framed glasses that gave her an intelligent look to match her intelligent brain. Dr. Bolton had helped many victims of violent traumas over the decades. "How have you been since we last spoke?" she asked.

"I'm not okay," I answered honestly, and caught her up on everything that had happened in my life since I'd hung up on her. My new house, my new school, the guys. I didn't tell her about our relationship. I figured that was a topic for another day. I saved the issue of my nightmares for last. She jotted down notes on a legal pad as she listened.

"I'm going to prescribe you something to take before bed," she said when we were coming up on the hour mark.

"As appealing as it sounds to be a zombie, I don't want to be numbed out," I said.

She jotted that down, too. "It won't do that. It's to calm you so you can sleep and hopefully keep you asleep all night," she explained. Then she looked me in the eye through the screen. "This medication isn't a solution. It's an aid, and a temporary one."

I understood what she was getting at and nodded.

"I'm going to be frank with you," she warned. "Healing is not easy. You'll have to talk about things I know you don't want to. Do you understand what I'm saying, Shiloh?"

“I’ll have to talk about that night.”

“Yes, but we’ll take it slow,” she said. “I would like to see you again tomorrow.”

I picked up the medication Dr. Bolton had prescribed me from the pharmacy after our session ended. I was nervous to take it. I fiddled with the bottle, listening to the sound of the pills sliding around inside, as I debated. Even though I was pretty sure the text messages I’d received were from Cassy and her friends, I was still scared. If I took this drug, would it put me in such a deep sleep I wouldn’t hear if someone broke in?

I debated whether or not I should get out of my comfortable bed and spend another night in the panic room on the floor. My sore back and tired body protested.

I grabbed my phone off my nightstand and pulled up Colt’s contact. Before I could talk myself out of it, I hit call and put the phone to my ear.

He answered after two rings. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“It’s late. Are you okay?” he asked.

I winced. It was close to midnight and he still had school tomorrow. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have called.”

“No, no. It’s okay. I couldn’t sleep,” he assured me. “Talk to me.”

“I started therapy today.”

“How did it go?”

“She prescribed me something to sleep, but I’m nervous to take it,” I admitted.

“Why?”

I had to think before answering. “I don’t know how it’s going to affect me.”

“Want me to come over?” he asked.

“I want you to, but I don’t know if it’s a good idea. I’m still upset.”

“You can still be upset with me while I hold you,” he said.

I squeezed the pill bottle in my hand. “Okay.”

“I’ll be right there,” he said, and we hung up.

I climbed out of bed to disarm the alarm and unlock the door so he

wouldn't have to. By the time I was twisting the deadbolt, he was on the other side of the door. I opened it and gestured for him to come in. After I locked up and rearmed the alarm, he took my hand and led me back to the bedroom. He watched me take the medicine Dr. Bolton had prescribed and we got comfortable in the bed, facing each other.

"Your voice matters," he said. "I'm sorry we didn't talk to you."

"Do you not feel comfortable being intimate with me because I'm a mess?" I asked.

"I don't think you're a mess and I have never thought that. As for sex, I'm ready to take that step when you are. I—we just didn't want you to feel pressured to take that step with us on top of everything you're dealing with."

"I love that you tried to put my well-being first. I really do. I can't even describe how wonderful it is to have that, but that doesn't mean you get to decide what you think is best for me and expect me to be alright with it without talking to me first."

He nodded.

"As for our relationship, don't ever leave me out of those conversations again."

"It won't happen again," he said and tucked my hair behind my ear. "You already sound and look so much better."

"I feel a little bit better. I'm hoping I'll feel a lot better when I wake up tomorrow," I said, snuggling into my pillow.

He scooted closer. "Can I kiss you goodnight?"

I smiled a little. "Yes."

Closing the space between us, he gave me a sweet and quick kiss. "Goodnight," he whispered.

"Goodnight," I whispered back.

I woke up the next morning and smiled. I hadn't dreamt and I felt fully rested. Overjoyed, I rolled over and climbed on top of Colt. He let out a groan. "Wake up," I said and peppered his face with kisses.

He caught me by the back of my neck to hold me in place. His lips captured mine before he flipped us. The back of my head hit the pillow and he held himself over me. Breaking our kiss, he said, "That was a good way to

wake up.”

I beamed up at him. “I didn’t have a nightmare and I slept all night.”

“That’s great, babe.” Smiling down at me, he pushed a strand of hair away from my face. “I love it when you smile.”

I reached up and grabbed the back of his neck. “Do you want to give me another reason to smile?”

His brows rose. “What?”

“Kiss me,” I said, pulling him close.

He leaned the rest of the way and the moment our lips touched, a consuming heat took over. Our tongues danced and he groaned as I nipped at his bottom lip. I ran my fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp as his mouth traveled to my neck. His tongue slid over that sweet spot under my ear and my thighs squeezed around his hips, which caused his pelvis to get closer to mine. I could feel that he was hard. I smoothed my hand down his bare chest and cupped him through his shorts.

He hissed. “Babe, if you touch me there, I can’t guarantee I’ll be good.”

“I don’t want you to be good,” I said and swallowed nervously. “I—I want you.”

He lifted his head from my neck and stared down at me, eyes searching mine. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I said with confidence and pointed to my nightstand. “I have condoms in there.”

He looked surprised.

My cheeks became hot. “I’ve been ready to take this step with you for a while.” I might have been a virgin, but I knew the risks with sex and I wanted to be safe. Making an appointment to get on birth control was on my list of things to do today.

Colt reached into my nightstand and grabbed a condom. He tossed it on the bed next to us and sat back on his haunches. He flicked his fingers toward him. “Come here.” I sat up and he grabbed the bottom of my shirt. “Arms up,” he ordered and I did as told. He carefully lifted my shirt up and over my head. He tossed it aside as his gaze dropped to my breasts and an intense desire filled his eyes.

Feeling shy, I had the urge to cover up, but I resisted. With a pounding heart, I let him look.

He hooked his fingers into the bands of my sleep shorts and underwear. “Lift your hips, babe.”

I arched back on my hands and lifted my hips for him to remove the last of my clothes. Just like he'd done with my shirt, he tossed my shorts and underwear. His eyes bounced all over me, as if he didn't know where he wanted to look more. The wait to see what he would do next was a delicious torture.

He scooted back a bit and pushed my legs open slowly. When he dipped between them, my heart tried to leap out of my chest. He kissed me a few inches up from where I really, really wanted him to kiss me. He moved a tiny bit lower, then a little bit lower again, drawing out my torture. When his warm mouth covered my clit, I fell back against the pillows, sighing. I felt his mouth form a smile before his tongue lapped over me, making my toes curl.

He chuckled. "Do you like that?"

"Yes."

"How about this?" he asked as he sucked me into his mouth.

My thighs squeezed around him as I groaned. There weren't any more questions after that. His tongue circled and flicked over me to the point of madness. I had my fingers fisted in his hair, holding him to me. When he eased two fingers into my soaking core, I was on the brink of coming.

"Colt," I moaned, needing him to get me there, and he didn't disappoint. He curled his fingers inside me as he pumped them in and out and didn't let up on my clit. I couldn't focus on any one thing he was doing, only how it all made me feel. The orgasm hit me and my back arched as I cried out.

Colt wiped his mouth on my inner thigh and sat up. Staring down at me, he smirked. "You okay?"

Panting, I nodded. My poor heart, which was already racing, sped into overdrive as he scooped up the condom. He pushed down his shorts and boxers and his thick shaft sprang free and stood at attention. Then he tore the foil wrapper open and rolled the condom on.

His eyes met mine as he crawled on top of me. "Are you ready?"

I nodded.

He reached between us and aligned himself with my entrance. I inhaled sharply as he pushed inside me. There was a tightness and stretching that was uncomfortable. That was expected and I knew it would pass. Once he was all the way in, I exhaled.

He kissed me. "Are you alright?"

I kissed him back. "Yes."

He withdrew a little and pushed back in, doing light and shallow thrusts

that allowed me to relax around him and begin to enjoy what was happening. He must have felt the change, because he withdrew further and drove back into me quicker.

I smiled.

“Why are you smiling?” he asked.

“Now I see what all the fuss is about,” I said, gripping his shoulders.

He smirked down at me. “We’re just getting started.”

He moved into me faster, coaxing from me moans and pleas for more and more.

“I think you mean harder, babe.”

“Harder?”

“This,” he said, thrusting into me.

It felt so good, I squeezed my eyes shut to savor the feeling. “Yup. That. Harder, please.”

He did as I asked. “You’re going to be sore later.”

“I don’t care,” I cried, feeling myself getting close. “Don’t stop.”

“If you don’t want me to stop, you better open those pretty eyes.”

I forced them open with a scrunched brow. “I’m going to cum,” I panted.

He leaned down, smiling. “I know you are,” he said and kissed me. It took a few more thrusts and his tongue stroking mine to ignite my orgasm. Colt swallowed my screams and groaned against my mouth as I dragged my nails down his back. He didn’t stop driving into me as I fell apart into a million pieces under him. Instead, he picked up his speed until he slammed into me one last time with a grunt, finding his own release.

I rubbed my hands up and down his back as we caught our breath. “Did I hurt you?” I asked him.

He huffed a laugh. “I’m supposed to ask you that.”

“I’m fine.”

“Just fine?”

I smiled. “Would you like me to rate this experience?”

He shook his head with the biggest smile. “Always the ballbuster.”

My smile didn’t waver as I stared up into his eyes. “It was perfect.”

He pressed his lips to mine and kissed me passionately. We stayed like that for a while, kissing, touching, and enjoying being as close as we possibly could be to each other. It was the connection I had wanted and what I felt in that moment was better than I could have imagined, because it was love. I was in love with him.

Colt slowly pulled out of me and climbed off the bed. Just before he disappeared into my bathroom, I got a glimpse of his back. I grimaced. He had red claw marks from his shoulders down to the middle of his back.

I sat up and searched for my pajamas. Once I found them, I put them on. When Colt returned from the bathroom, I tossed him his boxers and shorts.

He gave me a tiny grin as he stood there naked and perfect. “Are you kicking me out?”

“No, but you need to get ready for schoo—”

The sound of the front door unlocking followed by the alarm cut me off.

“Shi!” Creed yelled into the house.

“Get dressed,” I whispered to Colt before dashing out of my room. I could hear the beeping of Creed entering in the alarm code as I rushed down the hall. The alarm was off by the time I stepped into my living room and found Creed, looking as if he had just rolled out of bed.

“Hi,” I said and he looked in my direction.

“Hey,” he said softly. “Did Colt stay here last night?”

As he asked that, Colt walked into the living room and stood beside me.

Creed studied us, looking from Colt to me.

Colt cleared his throat. “I’m going to leave so you two can talk.” He leaned in and gave me a quick kiss before heading for the door. Creed’s eyes followed his twin as he walked out, then looked back at me, frowning. “You forgave him?”

“I did.”

“But not me?”

I folded my arms across my chest. “He and I talked and he apologized.”

“And then you slept together?”

It took a lot of effort not to react. “He spent the night.”

He moved closer, with a predatory look in his eye that made me retreat backward until my back met a wall. He didn’t stop his approach until his body was pressed against mine and his hands were flattened on the wall, caging me. “You look like you’ve been thoroughly fucked, Shi. Your lips are swollen, your cheeks are pink, and your hair is wild, like it got well acquainted with the mattress.”

All I could do was gape at him like a drowning fish for a few heartbeats before recovering. “What if I was?”

His hands fisted on the wall. “I’m jealous.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still mad at you.”

“That’s why I’m jealous,” he snapped.

“You can fix that.”

He pushed off the wall and took a step back. “I would. I’d get on my knees now and beg you to forgive me, but I can’t get over that you ran. You ran instead of talking to us, which was something you were mad at us for not doing.”

“I wasn’t running from you.” My shoulders slumped a little. What I was about to tell him was going to piss him off more than he already was, but I went on to tell him anyway. I told him about the text message and everything that had transpired after.

“Why didn’t you say something?” he snapped. “That was so incredibly stupid, running off on your own like that.”

“First of all, I was mad at all of you, and second, if it had been Mr. X, he would have killed you to get to me. I had to separate myself from you.”

“You should have told us. I don’t care how pissed you were or are.” He shook his head. “I find it hypocritical that you’re mad at us for making decisions about you when you turn around and do the same exact thing.”

“You don’t know what he’s capable of,” I seethed. “He’d gut you in front of me and then strangle me with your insides to teach me a lesson. He’s a psychopath who thinks I only belong to him. If he ever found me—”

“He won’t,” Creed assured me.

“If he did, I’d do whatever I could to save you four from what he did to my family. If that meant running, I’d run. If I had to fight him, I’d fight.”

Creed opened his mouth to argue and I covered it with my hand. “If I had to walk back into the home he murdered my family in—the one place I’m terrified of, because I barely escaped with my life—I’d do it. So long as you were all safe.”

Creed shoved my hand away and wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling me to him. He slammed his lips onto mine. In between kisses he said, “I’m so mad at you I could—” His hand smacked my butt, startling me.

“Creed,” I admonished between kisses.

Both of his hands squeezed my butt before he lifted me. I quickly wrapped my legs around his waist and he walked me to the dining room table. He set me down and cupped my face. “I’m sorry,” he said, pulling away. “I fucked up and I promise not to make decisions that involve you without talking to you first, so long as you promise to do the same.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but this time he covered my mouth. “I’d go

in that house with you.”

Tears filled my eyes.

“All of us would. Don’t take that decision from us,” he said.

One tear escaped, then two, both rolling down my cheeks.

He removed his hand from my mouth to wipe them away. “If that fucker ever shows up, we run together or we fight together, but more importantly, we protect each other together. Promise me, Shi.”

“I promise.”

AROUND NOON, AFTER MY SECOND THERAPY SESSION WITH DR. BOLTON, there was a knock on my door. I winced as I got up from the couch. Colt hadn't joked about me being a little sore. My whole pelvis felt like it had gone to the gym for the first time after being a couch potato its whole life.

I peeked through the peephole and opened the door to Keelan standing on my porch.

The emotion in his eyes told me that whatever he was here for was serious, but he still gave me a small smile. "Can we talk?"

I opened my door wider for him to come in. "No work today?"

He walked inside and stood in the center of my living room. "That's the thing about being the owner and boss. I sometimes work every day of the week and I sometimes take a random day off if I want."

I shut the door and leaned against it. "What made you take today off?"

"You."

My brows rose. "Me?"

"I want to apologize," he said and the seriousness in his eyes radiated through the rest of him. "I was the one who suggested no sex until you were better. It wasn't that I didn't trust you. I based the decision on my own past and the shitty choices I made. I saw you hurting and struggling and I saw myself."

I'd known that already, but I was glad that he'd realized what he had done. "Do you know the main reason I kissed you the other day?"

He shook his head. "No, but I'd like to know."

"I kissed you because I wanted to take your worry away," I said. "At the time, I couldn't verbally reassure you because I knew everything wasn't

alright. So I kissed you, and when I did, I discovered I could escape with you. But you stopped me and you explained that I could lose the four of you. That scared me.” I tucked my hair behind my ears. “I know this is going to sound bad, but I was alright with hurting myself. I wasn’t alright hurting any of you.” I held my hand out before he could say anything. “Like I said, I know that it’s terrible. I’m working on it.”

He nodded. “Colt told us you started therapy.”

“Yeah, I had my second session today. She wants to see me twice a week moving forward.”

“I’m sorry for not talking to you about what I feel for you and to see if you were comfortable pursuing a relationship with me as well. I meant to talk to you one-on-one...” He trailed off. It was clear that he was mulling over his words. “I should have tried harder and I’m truly sorry for that.” He sounded so guilt-ridden.

“You can talk to me now,” I said.

He didn’t hesitate to take the second chance I was offering him. He took my hand in his. “Shiloh, I think you’re the most amazing person I have ever met and I have feelings for you.”

I kept my cool. “What kind of feelings?” I had to make him work for it a little.

His mouth stretched into a smile. “The romantic kind.”

“Oh, wow.” I pretended to sound surprised. “What happens now?”

His smile didn’t waver as he shook his head at me. He pulled me closer until our bodies were touching and hooked an arm around my lower back. “You could let me take you to lunch and, if you’re up for it, we’ll go see the new Marvel movie after?”

I couldn’t have kept myself from smiling if I’d wanted to. “Are you asking me on a date?”

“I am.”

I felt a little nervous. “I’ve never been on a date before.”

“Yes, you have,” he said, staring down at me with what looked like devotion in his eyes, as if I were the most precious thing he had ever held in his arms. “We’ve gone out on many of them. The only difference with this date is that there are only two of us when all the other times there were five.”

Just like that, my nervousness evaporated. “Okay.”

Keelan took me to a French bistro called Zoe's for lunch.

"Keelan, this place looks closed," I said as we parked in front. The parking lot was empty and I didn't see a soul sitting inside through the restaurant's windows.

"It is," he said, turning off the car. "The owner is one of my students and she—"

"She?" I blurted and snapped my mouth shut, blushing.

Keelan grinned. "You have nothing to worry about, baby girl. Zoe is happily married to a woman."

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"Don't be. I find almost everything about you adorable and that gave me a good ego boost."

"I'm glad to help your already-big ego. Mine doesn't know how to take being called adorable."

"I'll happily tell you how sexy I think you are and all the dirty thoughts that enter my head when I look at you," he said as his eyes dropped to my mouth. "But I figured I'd keep this date respectable or else we might not make it inside."

My toes curled in my flats. I wish I'd had more time to get ready. All I had done was throw on a white summer dress and put my hair in a braid to the side. I cleared my throat. "Maybe you can tell me later."

He chuckled. "I can do that."

I was now more excited for that than lunch.

"Back to what I was saying...Zoe is the chef and owner. She was taught at that cooking school in Paris."

"Le Cordon Bleu?"

"Yup, that one." He pointed at the restaurant. "This place is only open for dinner, but she's making an exception today. I've talked to her about how you love to cook and she offered to cook us a private lunch, or if you want to, you're welcome back in her kitchen to cook with her."

He talked to her about me? "Wow, Keelan" were the only words I could form.

"Shall we go inside?"

"That's a silly question," I said, unbuckling my seat belt and climbing out of the car.

Zoe was an amazing woman and chef to meet. She was a short lady with a confident personality and a head full of orange, wild curls. Keelan and I never sat at a table for lunch. We followed Zoe into the kitchen and stayed there. Zoe showed us how to cook a few of the dishes she served, which I got to help make while Keelan stood by watching me with a smile. After the food was made, the three of us ate it right there in the kitchen. Zoe's passion and the way she talked about food reminded me of my mom and it made me nostalgic.

After that, we went to the movies and I overstuffed myself with popcorn. For the entire drive home and as he walked me to my door, Keelan held my hand. Once we were standing on my porch, Keelan surprised me by yanking on my hand. I fell into his arms and he kissed me. The way he kissed was smooth and confident. His tongue caressed mine in a way that made my knees go weak.

This should have been our first kiss, I thought. There wasn't any guilt behind it.

He pulled away and stroked my cheek with his fingers. "I should go. I'm sure Colt and Creed are wanting to see you."

I fisted his shirt in my hands. "Stay." His brows rose and I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. "I mean, we haven't had a *Game of Thrones* date in a while. Maybe just you and I could watch it at my place?"

He tilted his head toward his house. "Let me run home really quick to change and I'll be right back."

I nodded and we went our separate ways. He ran back home and I went inside. I changed into my Wonder Woman PJs and removed my makeup. As I dried my face, I looked at my stitches. I couldn't get them out until Monday. Scrunching my nose, I covered the ugly sight with my hair.

Keelan returned about twenty minutes later, dressed down to a white muscle shirt that showed off his arm tats and the Superman pajama bottoms I'd gotten him for his birthday. I smiled down at them and said, "Nice pajamas."

"A beautiful girl gave them to me for my birthday," he said and held up the box set of *Game of Thrones*. "And she gave me this."

"She sounds pretty amazing," I said, taking the box set from him and heading over to the TV to put the show on.

"She is," he said, sitting on the couch.

After getting the show started, I sat next to him. He rested his hand on my

bare thigh.

Colt and Creed texted me a few times, saying that they missed me and that Keelan had to return me tomorrow. That made me laugh and Keelan rolled his eyes.

A spicy scene came on in the show and his pointer finger began to stroke a tiny spot on my inner thigh. It was such a little touch, yet it was enough to set my blood on fire. I bit my lip and looked at him. Sensing me staring, he looked at me, too. No cues or words were needed. He put his hand to my cheek and he slammed his lips on mine. The way we kissed was hot, addictive, and intense. Like we needed each other but couldn't get enough. I crawled into his lap and straddled him without breaking our kiss. He grabbed my butt and squeezed. I ran my fingers into his hair and tugged a little, making him groan. His hand slid up my shirt, up my side and over my bare breast.

He cursed as he ran his thumb over my nipple. "You're not wearing a bra."

"Would you rather be touching my bra right now?"

He huffed a laugh and rolled my nipple between his fingers. "We should slow down or else—"

Keelan was cut off by the sound of my car's alarm going off outside. As we looked at the front door, the window in my living room shattered and a brick tumbled across the floor.

I screamed and Keelan threw me on the couch and covered me with his body. The alarm in the house started blaring.

When nothing else came through the window, Keelan got off of me and we jumped to our feet. We looked at the brick, then the window, which was covered by curtains. Keelan pulled the curtains away, revealing broken glass on the ground and the shattered window. Careful not to step on the glass, he looked outside.

"Get away from the window!" I shouted over the alarm.

The panic in my voice made him come to me. "It's alright! I didn't see anyone!" he shouted and wrapped his arms around me. "I'm going to go out there, but I want you to stay here!"

I pushed away to look up at him, shaking my head. "No! Wait for the police!"

Suddenly, there was pounding on the front door and I let out a scream.

"Shiloh! Keelan!"

It was Creed. Keelan went to the door and unlocked it. Creed and Colt rushed in, eyes only on me. Creed made it to me first, hands grasping my face. “Are you alright?” I barely heard him say.

I nodded.

“Can I turn that off?!” Colt shouted next to me while pointing at the alarm.

I nodded again, but the alarm went silent. I looked past Creed and saw Knox standing in front of it. His eyes met mine. I hadn’t seen him for two days and during that time, I’d tried my best not to think about how he hadn’t come to me. Not that I was playing a game, but Knox always chased me. If I was upset, he came after me. If I said or did something he didn’t understand, he’d hunt me down and demand clarity. He was a pushy and stubborn man, but for once, he wasn’t chasing me.

“Your car is completely trashed,” Knox said.

I moved past Colt and Creed and headed for the door. The moment I stepped onto my porch and saw my car, my shoulders slumped.

Written all over my car in red paint was the word *WHORE*. The front windshield and a few of the side windows were busted in. The tires were slashed, again.

“It doesn’t take a genius to figure out who did this,” Creed said as he came to stand next to me.

“Instead of guessing, can’t you just look at your camera footage?” Knox asked.

Sirens sounded in the distance as I spun around and ran back inside. I could feel someone following me as I went to my panic room and put in the code, unlocking it. After flipping on the light, I went straight to the computer and shook the mouse to wake the screens. As soon as they were up, showing the different areas of the house, I rewound the feed. Sure enough, Cassy, Amber, and Gabe snuck up to my house from somewhere down the street and began destroying my car.

“What is this room?” Creed asked behind me.

“It’s sort of like a panic room,” I shot over my shoulder as I copied the camera feed of the past hour and sent it to my email.

“Is this a gun safe?” Colt asked.

I got up from the desk and saw Colt and Creed eyeing the huge, black gun safe in the corner of the room. “Yes,” I answered simply.

“Shiloh, the police are here!” Keelan yelled from the front of the house.

The three of us went back out front, but not before I grabbed my phone and wristlet off the coffee table first. A police car was parked by the curb and two officers were talking with Knox and Keelan on my lawn.

“This is her,” Keelan said to the cops as I approached.

They eyed me skeptically. “You’re the owner of this home, miss?” one of the officers said. I could hear the doubt in his voice.

I read their names above their badges. One was named Cortez and the other was Simmons. I pulled out my ID and held it out to them. “Yes, I’m the owner.”

“And this is your car?” Officer Cortez asked, nodding toward my 4Runner as Officer Simmons took my ID.

“It is,” I answered. They asked me what had happened and I told them my perspective from inside my house. Then I said, “I know who did it.” They looked up from their little notepads, expectant, and I continued. “I have cameras all around my house.” I pulled up my email on my phone and clicked on the video before holding it out for them to look at. “You can see their faces clearly.”

The officers watched the footage. “Yes, you can,” Officer Simmons said and held out his card with his info on it. “Can you send a copy of this to me?”

I took the card and my phone back. “I can give you their names.”

“I’ll take them,” Officer Cortez said, putting his pen to his notepad.

“Amber Thorn, Gabe Harris, and Cassy McAllister.”

His pen froze when I said Cassy’s name and looked from his notepad to me. “‘McAllister’ as in Sheriff McAllister’s daughter?”

I looked at Creed and saw him grimacing. He had told me that Cassy’s father was a cop, not the sheriff.

“Yes, that’s her,” Creed said.

The two officers glanced at each other before Cortez cleared his throat and asked, “Are you wanting to press charges?”

“Oh yeah I am. Do you not see my car?” I asked caustically.

They looked at each other again until Simmons finally said with a tone full of dread, “I’ll go fill out the report,” and walked to their squad car.

Officer Cortez finished writing on his little notepad and tucked it into one of his vest’s pockets. “I’m going to need to take pictures of everything,” he said and went to the trunk of their squad car and pulled out a camera. While he took pictures of my car and the front window of my house, Officer Simmons went over the report he’d filled out and had me sign it.

By the time they left and I took my own pictures of all the damage, I was exhausted. I stood in my living room, staring at the broken window, thinking of all the things I'd have to do tomorrow to fix everything. There was no way I'd take the medicine Dr. Bolton had prescribed tonight. Not with my window like this.

"Babe," Colt said, walking in from the front porch with Creed. The four of them had been talking out there when I had come in. "Keelan and Knox ran to the hardware store to get some plywood to put over your window," Colt announced.

"The store is still open?" It was a useless question, but it popped into my head.

"It closes in about twenty minutes, but they'll get there in time," Creed said. "I think you should stay at our place tonight."

"I don't know if that's a good idea," I said and took a seat on the couch.

"Why?" Creed asked with a frown.

"It's because of Knox, isn't it?" Colt said, being too perceptive for his own good. He glanced at Creed. "They haven't talked."

Creed looked at me. "It's not like you're going to be sleeping in his room."

I winced at that and they both caught it.

"You know, he wouldn't tell us what went down with you two or how this fight with all five of us started," Colt said. "By that reaction, I feel like something bad happened."

I got up from the couch. "What Knox and I did together is our business."

"So you two really did do something?" Creed asked as the two of them followed me down the hall to my room.

I didn't respond as I grabbed a purse out of my closet. I began stuffing things I'd need to stay at the guys' inside of it. I knew they weren't going to take no for an answer. I grabbed my pills and phone chargers.

"I'll take your silence as a yes," Creed grumbled.

"Just let it go, Creed," Colt said.

It wasn't long before Knox and Keelan returned with a big piece of plywood and boarded up my window. I avoided looking at Knox as we all walked into their house. Creed grabbed my hand and started to lead me to their side of the house. Before we could get far, my other hand was grabbed, and I was pulled out of Creed's grasp.

My back bumped into Keelan's chest and he wrapped his arm around my

waist. "Wait a minute," he said.

Creed turned around and frowned at his brother.

Keelan ignored him and looked down at me. "If it's alright with you, I'd like you to stay with me tonight."

"I haven't slept with my girlfriend in over a week," Creed grumbled.

"She's never spent the night with me," Keelan grumbled right back.

Colt snorted.

Creed glared at him. "Don't get me started on you. I saw your back in gym today."

"Creed!" Colt and I snapped at the same time and Creed winced, looking guilty.

"What's wrong with his back?" Knox asked, who had been watching us silently.

"Nothing," Colt insisted.

Knox looked from Colt to Creed. "What's wrong with his back?"

Keelan's hold on me tightened a little and my gut told me he knew.

When Creed stayed tight-lipped, Knox looked back at Colt. "Take off your shirt."

Colt's Hulk side came to the surface and he stared down his older brother. "I'm not doing that."

Knox walked toward Colt, eyes burning with anger. I jerked away from Keelan and stepped in front of Knox, blocking him from getting any closer to Colt. I locked my gaze with his. "Colt and I had sex. What Creed was referring to on Colt's back are the scratches I put there when we did."

I hadn't thought he could look any angrier, but I was wrong. Without a word, he stormed off, and a few seconds later we all heard his bedroom door slam shut.

"Nice going, asshole," Colt snapped at his twin.

Creed rubbed his hands down his face. "That was totally my bad." He looked at me. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you like that. I'm only used to sharing with Colt." He gestured to Keelan. "This is going to take some getting used to."

I nodded. I understood there would be a lot of trial and error with this type of relationship. I glanced at Keelan, feeling nervous. Questions like *Will he still want me?* popped into my head.

His expression was schooled. *Is that a good thing or a bad thing?* I wondered. He reached for me and pulled me back into his arms. "Will you

stay with me tonight?”

“Yes.”

Someone came up behind me and kissed my head. “Goodnight, babe,” Colt said, and as I looked back at him, he was already heading toward his room.

Creed took that opportunity to grab my face and kiss the heck out of me. “Goodnight,” he said, pulling away and leaving for his room, too.

Keelan led me to his room. It was neat, and he had a connected bathroom. His bed was very big and the linen on his bed was a very dark red. “I thought Knox’s favorite color was red,” I said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

He smiled as he approached me. “It is. It just happens to be my favorite color, too.” He kissed my forehead. “Let’s get ready for bed.”

And that was what we did. Keelan got me a glass of water to take my medicine. Just like Colt had done, he watched me take it. I had barely climbed into his bed when he pulled me to him and snuggled me from behind.

“There we go,” he said and yawned.

I closed my eyes, smiling.

I STARTLED AWAKE WITH A POUNDING HEART. I SAT UP, RUBBING MY CHEST. I was scared but didn't know why. Had I been dreaming? Had I had a nightmare?

"Hey, what's wrong?" Keelan asked, his voice heavy with sleep, and sat up with me. "Did you have a nightmare?"

"I can't remember."

"It's alright. Let's lay back down and I'll hold you."

I nodded, lying back with him. He tucked me close and I rested my head on his bare chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. The moonlight shining through his window was enough light to show his tattoos. I ran my fingers over one above his hip. Then trailed them to the one under his belly button. The muscles in his stomach went taut.

"If you keep touching me like that, I'll never fall back to sleep," he said, his voice sounding more awake.

I smiled to myself. "Since you're awake, maybe you can tell me the dirty things you think of when you look at me." I didn't know if it was because I was half asleep or the medicine I was on, but I was feeling very brave at the moment.

He stilled beneath me. "I don't think you're ready for that."

"Hmm," I hummed. "Then can I tell you the dirty things I think of?"

His chest shook with silent laughter. "I'd love to hear them."

I tapped my finger below his belly button. "I want to kiss you right here."

"You can kiss me anywhere you want to."

I took that as an invitation and scooted down the bed and settled between his legs. I planted an open-mouth kiss below his belly button, then tapped his

hip. "Can I kiss you here?"

He put an arm behind his head as he stared down at me. "Like I said, anywhere."

I planted a kiss on his hip and trailed my mouth along the waistband of his pants to the center. Looking up at him, I asked, "What if I want to kiss you lower?"

He stroked his fingers along my cheek. "Have you ever done that before?"

I shook my head. "Will you let me?"

"Will I let you?" He huffed a laugh. "That's a silly question, baby girl."

I tucked my fingers into the bands of his PJs and boxers and he lifted his hips, aiding me in pulling them down around his thighs. He was already hard. I wrapped my hand around the base of his cock, finding him warm and his skin soft. I gave the very tip a gentle kiss.

His body shook, laughing. "Everything you do is adorable."

"Is this adorable?" I asked as I ran my tongue along the underside of his shaft.

He hissed.

"Or this?" I asked before sucking the mushroom tip into my mouth.

He let out a shaky breath. "Where'd a sweet girl like you learn to do that?"

I swirled my tongue around him. "I may have researched it."

"Did you now?" he grunted. "Are you going to show me everything you learned?"

I smiled just before taking him back into my mouth. I took him in until he touched the back of my throat and pulled back, sucking and running my tongue along him as I did. I repeated that over and over again.

"Fuck," he hissed and his hands collected my hair that was starting to obscure his view. His grip tightened as I took him all the way back into my mouth. Before I could pull back, one of his hands cupped the back of my head, holding me still. "Relax your throat," he ordered and I did. Gently, he thrust further down my throat. "That's it, good girl." His hips began rocking, sliding himself in and out. "I want to fuck your mouth so bad," he said, sounding as if he were in pain. "But I don't want to cum down your throat for our first time." He pulled himself from my mouth. "You've made your point. You want to hear the dirty things I'm thinking, here you go. I want to bury my cock deep into your tight little pussy and I want you on your hands and

knees when I do.”

I clenched my thighs at the intense throb between them. “Oh,” I blurted.

Keelan cursed and sat up. “That was too much, wasn’t it?”

I shook my head. “No. I liked it.”

“I got carried away and I forgot how new to this you—”

I covered his mouth. “I may be new to this, but I’m not afraid to tell you I’m not alright with something.” I held his eyes, hoping he would see how serious I was. “So get carried away with me,” I said with a whisper, dropping my hand.

He kissed me fiercely, his tongue plunging past my lips. He grabbed the bottom of my shirt and broke our kiss to lift it over my head. He tossed it away haphazardly and climbed off the bed. He flicked on the light on the nightstand and the room lit up. As he opened his nightstand drawer and grabbed a condom, he shoved his PJs and boxers the rest of the way off.

I sat there on my knees in the center of his bed, topless, and took in every inch of his body. He was breathtaking, from his gorgeous tattoos to his defined muscles. My favorite part to look at was the V at his hips and his hard cock just below. My panties grew uncomfortably wet the longer I stared.

He began stroking himself with his hand. “I’ve thought about those breasts a lot,” he admitted, his eyes watching the rise and fall of my chest. “Ever since I saw them for the first time when I caught my brother’s face between your legs. For weeks, I’ve cum to that image of you with your head thrown back, pink cheeks, and your pert nipples begging someone to suck on them.”

I wondered if it was a family trait to have two personalities. Colt hulked out when he was angry. Keelan reminded me of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He was a charming Jekyll in public, but in the bedroom he was a filthy Hyde. I couldn’t decide which side I liked more.

I got on my hands and knees and met his eyes. “You wanted me like this?” It was probably the boldest I’d ever been in my life, but I needed him to see I was good with this—with him—and if I was being honest, I really liked how it felt. It was exciting.

His eyes traveled over me like I was a toy he couldn’t wait to play with. “Yes, but without cute Wonder Woman shorts on.”

I wiggled my hips. “Then come take them off.” The smile he gave me made me feel empowered.

He climbed back onto the bed and knelt behind me. He yanked my

underwear and shorts down. I had to help him by lifting each of my knees to get them the rest of the way off, but I was fully naked in no time.

“Put your head to the mattress,” he ordered. I lowered my head slowly, leaving my butt in the air. His thumbs spread me open, revealing all of me to him. He groaned. “Damn, that’s a beautiful sight.”

My face felt like it was on fire. “Keelan,” I sort of chastised him. How could I be equally embarrassed and turned on?

He chuckled. “You have a beautiful body. I’m just admiring every inch of it.”

“Even with my scars?” I blurted and shut my eyes, mortified that my insecurities had made an appearance.

“Every part of you is beautiful, Shi.” He pressed his lips to the center of my back. “Even your scars.”

I will not cry during sex. I will not cry during sex.

One of his hands dropped from my butt cheek and his fingers began rubbing my clit.

I wanted to yell *Yes!* but resisted the urge. I’d embarrassed myself enough.

“You’re dripping wet,” he said as he moved his fingers from my clit to my core. He pushed two fingers inside me, making me moan.

As he pumped them in and out of me, I rocked back. “I need more, Keelan.”

“I need to prep you to take my cock, baby, or I could hurt you,” he explained, pushing a third finger into me—stretching me. “One day, if you want me to, I can just shove into this pussy and fuck you because we’re caught up in the moment, but let’s take our time tonight.”

“Thank you for being mindful and for giving me something to look forward to later.”

He chuckled. “Happy to be of service.” He pulled his fingers from me and I heard the noise of him ripping open the condom. “I think you’re ready for me now.”

I lifted my head off the mattress when he aligned himself with my entrance. He pushed forward, sliding in slowly. The feeling nearly had my eyes rolling to the back of my head.

Once he was fully inside of me, he held me by my hips and began rocking his own. He moved in and out with slow, gentle thrusts that felt like a tease.

I pushed back. “Harder.”

“You’re not ready—”

I slammed myself back on him again. “Quit holding back on me,” I practically growled.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” His words brought me back to the first time we’d sparred. We had said the same thing to each other.

“I can take you, pretty boy,” I threw over my shoulder.

He chuckled and gripped my hips more firmly. Then he thrust into me.

“Yes!” I cried out.

He continued to pound into me. The sound of my moans and his thighs smacking the back of mine filled the room. I had to put my hand on the headboard to keep myself from falling forward. One of his hands wrapped around to my front and rubbed my clit. I moaned loud because it was just what I needed.

“You keep moaning like that, you’ll wake my brothers, and I didn’t lock the door.” His other hand went to one of my breasts and rubbed my nipple between his fingers. “If they come in here, I’m not stopping. They’ll watch me fuck you.”

The thought of any of them watching this—what we were doing—had me clenching around him.

He groaned. “Does that turn you on? What a naughty girl,” he said with a low voice. “I wonder how much louder I can make you.” He rubbed my clit with more pressure.

I tried to fight back my moans, but the moment I felt my orgasm building, they ripped their way out of me. “Don’t stop!” I begged.

“You gonna cum for me?”

“Yes!”

He didn’t stop. Instead, he made me shatter. My orgasm was so intense I saw spots as I lowered my head back to the mattress. Keelan continued to thrust into me, spurring my orgasm on and on. It was almost too much. My cries were muffled by the mattress until Keelan drove into me one last time, groaning. He pulled out of me and fell onto his back on the mattress, panting.

I stretched my legs out so that I was lying on my stomach, my breathing also labored. “Wow,” I huffed out between breaths.

He gave me this cocksure smirk. “I know.”

I grabbed my pillow and hit him with it as I tried not to laugh.

We were able to sleep for a few more hours before Keelan's alarm went off. All four of them had to work today. Keelan and I both shuffled into the kitchen holding hands. We both halted when we saw that Colt, Creed, and Knox were already in the kitchen, looking tired and sipping on coffee.

"Good morning," I said, letting go of Keelan's hand to go over to the coffee maker.

"You two are up before me?" Keelan said to Colt and Creed. "Did hell freeze over?"

"Couldn't fall back to sleep after being woken up by Shiloh at three in the morning," Creed grumbled.

I whirled around. "What?"

Creed rubbed his eyes tiredly. "I thought she was having a nightmare at first."

"We all did," Knox said, sounding irritated.

I looked at Keelan. "We weren't that loud, were we?"

He scratched the side of his neck. "How do I say this...?"

"You're a screamer, babe," Colt said as gently as he could.

"I—" I supposed I got loud, especially when I was close to coming. "Um...I'm sorry. I didn't know I was doing something wrong. I won't do that anymore."

"No!" Colt and Keelan shouted at the same time.

"There's nothing wrong with it," Keelan assured me.

Colt nodded. "It's hot."

"And don't stop talking in bed, either. I love that you're brave enough to do that. Sometimes it can take a while for someone to feel comfortable enough to voice what they want," Keelan explained.

Creed covered his face, groaning.

Knox slammed his mug down on the counter and stormed out of the room.

I turned back around and poured myself some coffee. *Don't do it. Don't chase him.* I let out an angry grumble and stomped out of the room.

"Good luck," Keelan said as I left.

I walked into Knox's room without knocking. I didn't see him, but saw the bathroom door was open and the light was on. I headed there and stopped in the doorway. Knox was at the sink, arms braced on the counter and his head downcast.

"Knox," I said.

He tensed up and looked at me through the mirror. "I wouldn't be around me right now, Shiloh."

"Why?"

"Because I can't guarantee that I won't say something that will hurt you," he said. "I don't want to hurt you."

I supposed it was my risk to take. Stay or go? I wanted to push him like he pushed me all the time. I wanted to demand that he talk to me. But I was scared of the answer he'd give me.

He didn't chase me.

Did that mean I already had my answer?

I thought it did.

I backed away and left.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, THERE WAS A KNOCK ON MY DOOR. I LOOKED through the peephole and saw that it was a police officer. I cracked the door open and peeked out. "Can I help you?" He was an older cop. Late forties, early fifties. His uniform was slightly different from the other two officers' I'd seen last night. His looked crisp, almost decorative, and not as worn.

"Are you Shiloh Pierce?" he asked, his cold, honey-colored eyes bouncing all over my face.

"I am."

"I'm Sheriff McAllister. I was informed there was an incident here last night," he said in a professional tone.

This was Cassy's father.

"I wouldn't call it an incident. If you look in my driveway and at my window right here, you'd see that it's more like vandalism or the destruction of private property."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "I thought we could talk about it." He put his hand on my door. "Maybe I could come in."

The hair on the back of my neck rose. My instincts were screaming to get away from this man. I put my foot up against the door and mentally pictured where my nearest gun was. Behind the TV and under the coffee table. "I'm not comfortable with that. I know you're Cassy's father."

He held up his hands. "I only came here to have a heart-to-heart with you," he said. "I want to tell you that Cassy regrets what she did. She hasn't had an easy life. Her mother walked out on us when she was nine and I wasn't home a lot because the job of a cop is very demanding. This is her first offense and I just don't want this one mistake to ruin her future."

He portrayed the role of a concerned father almost too well. I didn't believe a single word that came out of his mouth. "No offense, sir, but your daughter is a bully. She has made my life hell since the first day of school. Bad actions have consequences. As a cop, you should understand that. Your daughter deserves what she gets." The more I spoke, the angrier he looked. "I don't think it would be appropriate to speak to you further without a lawyer present. Have a nice day." I went to shut my door and he slammed his hand on it, stopping it from closing. He then pushed, trying to open it wider.

"You're making a big mistake," he snarled, with a violent rage molding his face.

I knew a threat when I heard one. Fear surged through my veins as I struggled to hold the door.

"I could arrest you right now. I would tell everyone you attacked me when all I tried to do was apologize. My daughter's charges will be thrown out by Monday," he said in a low voice.

"I'm so glad you just said that," I forced out through the strain of holding the door.

"Why's that?"

"Because I just got that on camera," I said.

He froze.

I risked pointing a finger at the corner of my porch. "If you look over your shoulder, you'll see it."

He glanced over his shoulder and saw it. When he looked back at me, I knew I was in trouble. He shoved my front door open, making me stumble back a step. I barely saw the back of his hand before he struck me and I fell to the floor. Blood coated my tongue and spots speckled behind my eyes.

I was grabbed by my hair. "Get up," he ordered, yanking me by my hair. My training kicked in then. Grabbing his hand, I spun around on my butt so that I was facing him. I threw my foot up into his groin and he released me. I scrambled to my coffee table and felt around underneath for my gun. The moment my hand touched it, I could see him coming for me in my peripheral vision. I ripped the gun free and pointed it at him when his hand was inches from touching me.

I stared him down, my hands steady and my finger hovering over the trigger. I'd never shot anyone before. I hoped I never would. However, if he tried to touch me again, I wouldn't hesitate.

He stood straight. "You don't know what you've just done, little girl," he

seethed down at me. “You show anyone that camera footage, I will hang you from the nearest tree and make it look like a suicide.”

“Get out of my house,” I bit out. My lip hurt with every word.

He smoothed down his uniform before he walked out, leaving the door open. I didn’t move as I listened to his car start and drive away. Slowly, I stood on shaky legs and shut and locked the door. Leaning against it, I just breathed. In and out.

It’s going to be okay. You are okay.

I needed to figure out what to do. It didn’t take long. It was time to call my uncle.

I went and got my burner cell phone from my room. **I need you to call me**, I texted him. Apart from my check-ins, we hadn’t talked on the phone since I’d gotten out of the hospital. Five minutes passed and my burner started ringing. Seeing as he wasn’t calling me on my personal phone, he didn’t have access to an untraceable and secure line.

“Hello,” I said, answering.

“Are you safe?” There was no beating around the bush. He got straight to the point.

I whimpered as I tried to hold it together. “I don’t think I am.”

“Tell me what’s going on.”

I told him about all the bullying happening at school. How Cassy and her friends had destroyed my car. I told him how her father, the sheriff, had showed up and attacked and threatened me.

“Fucking Christ, you have the worst fucking luck,” he cursed. “How badly did he hit you? Did you lose consciousness at all?”

“No. He just backhanded me. All I can tell is that I have a split lip. I haven’t looked in the mirror yet.”

“He *just* backhanded you? Really, Shi?” He let out a slew of curses that would have made a sailor blush. “You should have shot the bastard.”

Maybe I should have. Not much I could do about it now. Fingers crossed, I hadn’t just made a huge mistake.

He sighed. “Do you think you’ll be alright until Monday? That’s the soonest I can get there.”

That was the day after tomorrow. “I think I’ll be alright.”

“Despite what happened, are you okay?” he asked.

“Right now, I don’t know. I might need to move my session with Dr. Bolton up,” I said.

“Dr. Bolton? You’re back in therapy?”

“Yeah, I need to tell you about that, too.” With a heavy sigh, I explained how I’d been failing to deal with my grief, and everything that had happened that had led me back to going to therapy. The only thing I avoided talking about as much as I could was the guys.

“Well, you’re definitely my niece. I got suspended from school for kicking another kid's ass, too,” he said.

“That’s all you took away from what I told you?”

“No, I heard it all,” he assured me. “I’m glad to hear that you’re back in therapy.”

We hung up not long after that.

I went into the bathroom to assess the damage. My bottom lip was split and swollen. I also had a small bruise already showing just below the corner of my mouth. I knew there was no way to hide it. I did entertain the idea of lying. Then I remembered the promise I’d made to Creed.

I debated for hours on what I was going to tell the guys. By the time the four of them got off work, I had a bag packed and I was waiting on their couch. Three out of the four had smiles when they saw me sitting there as they walked in. That was, until they saw my face.

“What the fuck?” Creed said as he dropped his gym bag and rushed over to me. Colt and Keelan were a second behind him.

Creed knelt in front of me. “Who am I fucking killing?” he asked.

Colt sat next to me on the couch and Keelan stood behind Creed. Knox was the last to make his way over.

My chin trembled and I clenched my teeth to make it stop. “I got a visit from Cassy’s father...” Just like I had with my uncle, I told them everything that had happened. I even told them about the text I’d gotten and how I’d thought it was from Mr. X. Creed had already known, but by the others’ shocked faces, it was safe to say he hadn’t told them.

“I called my uncle,” I said. “He’ll be here Monday.”

“You think he’ll be able to deal with the sheriff?” Colt asked.

“I do.”

“You need to stay here until your uncle arrives,” Keelan said. His tone

brooked no argument. Both he and Knox had the same angry look on their faces.

I pointed to my bag by the front door. "I figured you'd say that. So I packed a bag."

Colt ran his hand up and down my back. "Is there anything I can get you?"

"Got any whiskey?" I joked.

"You can have a beer," Knox said.

My brows threatened to touch my hairline. "I was kidding, but I'll still take it."

Knox nodded and headed for the kitchen.

"Are you hungry?" Keelan asked, his voice still sounding angry.

I stood from the couch and went to him. Wrapping my arms around his waist, I laid my cheek on his chest. It was the best way I could offer him comfort because yet again, I couldn't tell him it was going to be alright. He didn't hesitate to circle his arms around me, holding me tightly.

"Can we order in?" I asked.

"What are you craving, Shi?" Creed asked, standing and pulling out his phone.

"Can we get food from the diner delivered?"

Creed nodded and began ordering everything we liked on his phone.

Knox returned with five beers and handed one to everyone and we all took a seat on the couch. Every time I took a sip, the beer stung my lip. I touched the cut gently and winced.

"Does it hurt?" Colt asked, watching me.

I dropped my hand. "A little, but I've been hit harder."

"By who?" Creed questioned, sounding as if he were ready to hunt down whoever it was.

I picked at the label on my beer bottle. "Mr. X." I allowed my mind to peek at the forbidden corner of my brain and I looked at the memories of that moment. "He caught me when I was trying to escape," I said and I noticed them all go still around me. I kept picking at the label as I continued. "I didn't know how to defend myself then, but I fought the best I could. It didn't do me any good. He still got me upstairs and dragged me to my bedroom. I screamed as loud as I could, hoping that the neighbors would hear me. They didn't. I tried to grab on to something that would help stop me from getting any closer to my room, because I knew once he got me there, he'd rape me."

The image of Shayla's body popped into my head and I took a drink. Not that it would help. It'd take more than one beer to make me feel better. "He dragged me past Shayla's body in the hall." I cleared my throat when it began to feel tight. "He dragged me through her blood. He purposely slowed so I would see her—see that she was dead. He did it to break me because the main reason I was fighting so hard to escape was to get her help." I finished tearing off the label and I felt irritated that I didn't have something to focus on. I took another sip and leaned back against the couch. "Looking back now, it was stupid to think I even had a chance at saving her."

"Why do you say that?" Knox asked and his brothers all gave him a look like he had done something wrong.

"He slit her throat right in front of me. She bled out so quickly there was just no way." My voice was so factual and held zero emotion. "At the time—in the moment—I didn't want to believe it." I finished the rest of my beer with one last gulp. Colt took the empty bottle and label from my hands and replaced them with his, which was still full. I began picking at his label. "After dragging me past Shayla, Mr. X managed to get me in my room. He pulled me off the floor by my hair and I clawed his face. That pissed him off, so he backhanded me. He hit me so hard I blacked out, and when I came to, my wrists and ankles were tied to my bed." I couldn't say any more. I tried to back away from that corner of my mind, but it was hard. It tried to show me things I didn't want to see. My hands began trembling uncontrollably and my stomach rolled. Next, I broke out in a cold sweat and I knew I was going to be sick. I stood from the couch and rushed to the bathroom. I barely made it to the toilet before all the beer I'd drunk came back up.

Hands grabbed my hair and held it up. Someone took the beer bottle that I was still clutching in my hand. When I was able to stop heaving, I sat back on my butt. I covered my face with my hands, and I cried.

Someone pulled me against their chest and rubbed their hand up and down my back. "You did good, babe," Colt said softly into my ear. "I know that wasn't easy and I'm so proud of you."

I didn't know how long we were in that bathroom, but Colt held me until I eventually calmed down, while the other three stood by in support.

THE REST OF THE WEEKEND FLEW BY. MY TIME WAS MOSTLY OCCUPIED getting my window repaired, calling my insurance company, and purchasing a new car. I slept with the twins the first night. Things were kept PG. After being attacked by the sheriff and sharing a little piece of the night my family had been killed, I'd just wanted to be held. I'd spent the night with Keelan last night and the whole night had been deliciously X-rated.

It was now Monday. I had decided to skip school today. I wasn't ready to return to the drama or see Cassy. I was sitting in my doctor's lobby, waiting to be called. I couldn't stop smiling. My thoughts were replaying everything that had happened last night. The things Keelan had done to me...the things Keelan had had me do. One moment in particular was my favorite. Keelan had instructed me to hold onto the headboard and then he'd had me straddle his face. Remembering what his tongue had done to me made me blush. It had been the dirtiest thing I'd ever experienced and I'd loved every minute of it.

"You have the smile of a woman in love," a little old lady whispered to me as she leaned in close. "You're glowing."

"I am?"

She smiled.

The medical assistant came into the waiting room with a chart in her hand. "Shiloh," she called. I gave the old lady a small smile and let the medical assistant lead me to an exam room.

I left the doctor stitches-free and with a prescription for birth control. After stopping by the pharmacy really quick, I went home. As I pulled up to my house, I spotted Logan sitting on my porch steps. I turned off my new

silver 4Runner, hopped out, and ran across the lawn.

Logan stood from the steps, arms already open. I leapt into them. With my feet dangling off the ground, he held me tightly.

“It feels like you’ve been gone for years,” I said into his shoulder.

“Yes, it does,” he said, setting me on my feet. He patted my head. “You changed your hair again.”

I nodded, pulling on a strand. “Yeah, I went with a friend to get it done.”

“A girlfriend?”

I scoffed. “Yes, a friend that is a girl.”

“Did she get Ronald McDonald hair, too?”

I frowned. “I don’t have clown hair.”

“Whatever you say, Pennywise,” he said and I had to resist the urge to roll my eyes.

I went up the porch steps and unlocked the front door. Logan grabbed his suitcase and took it straight back to the spare bedroom. I went to my bathroom. Pulling my birth control from my purse, I put it in the medicine cabinet.

“What are your plans for the rest of the day?” he asked from the hall.

I went into my bedroom and saw him standing in the doorway. “I have that class I help teach with Keelan in a few hours.”

He nodded. “That’s one of the neighbor boys?”

“You already know the answer to that question.”

He smiled. “Ian said you were dating one of them, but couldn’t figure out who. We may or may not have made bets as to who it is.”

“What if I’m not dating any of them? Or what if I’m dating all of them?” I snapped.

He narrowed his eyes as he studied me. “You’re being defensive.”

“I’m not being defensive. I want to know why it’s so important who I’m dating.” I didn’t find it funny that they had placed bets. In fact, it really pissed me off.

“Because I want to make sure my niece is dating someone who is respectful and will treat her right.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “And I’m incapable of making sure of that myself?”

“It’s my responsibility to protect you, Shi,” he said, avoiding my question.

“I may be young, but I wouldn’t give someone my time if they hadn’t

earned it. Especially with everything I've been through," I said, walking past him.

I went to the kitchen to make lunch. I pulled things from the fridge and pantry after deciding to make sandwiches. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Logan creep in with his hands in his pockets.

"Ian is looking into the sheriff," he said.

I grabbed two plates from the cabinet and set them on the island. "Ian's here?"

Logan took a seat on one of the barstools and watched as I fixed two sandwiches. "He's around." That was a vague answer. "Tell me more about the class you help teach."

Letting go of my irritation, I explained what it was. Once the sandwiches were ready, I handed one to him. As we ate, we sort of caught up. I talked a little about the guys and therapy. I didn't ask about Mr. X. Right now, I didn't care to know anything. I couldn't take it on with everything else.

"Dr. Bolton plans to teach me new ways to handle things that could trigger an episode. I figured I could test out whatever she teaches me with a scary movie," I said. "She also wants me to continue running. She said that if I use running the *right way*, it'll help me."

I caught him staring at me.

"What?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I'm not used to seeing you excited about therapy. You used to hate it."

"I want control of my life again. In order to achieve that, I need this to work."

"Would your sudden change of heart about therapy have to do with the boys next door?" he asked.

"They encouraged me to go back," I admitted.

"Huh," he said and finished off his sandwich.

I scooped up my plate and carried it over to the sink. "What?"

He also brought his plate to the sink. "I'd like to see this gym and maybe sit in on your class?"

"It's for women."

He leaned a hip against the counter. "I won't participate. I was thinking I could watch from the back."

I had to clear it with Keelan first, but I didn't see a reason why it wouldn't be alright, and if by chance it wasn't, he could spend the hour

working out in the rest of the gym. “Let me text Keelan.”

As we pulled up to Desert Stone, I caught Logan staring at me again. “Cheese and rice, just spit it out and stop being creepy.”

“I’m just surprised you’re not wearing a sweatshirt and you’re wearing something so revealing,” he said.

I parked the car and glanced down at my outfit. I was wearing white athletic leggings with a matching racerback top. I had a tiny bit of cleavage showing, but by *revealing*, I believed he was talking about my scars. The last time he’d seen me, I’d always worn sweatshirts and made sure I hadn’t left the house unless every scar had been covered. Today, I had pretty much all my scars on display except for the ones on my stomach.

“The staring doesn’t bother me as much as it used to,” I said, running a finger over the scar on my inner arm. “Some days, I forget they are there. On days like today, when I have a class, I’m very aware I have them. A lot of the women in this class have been through terrible things. By having my scars out for them to see, I think it reassures them they aren’t alone.”

“What about you?” he asked. “Do you get anything out of teaching them?”

“I like that what I help teach them could save them one day.” I looked at the other end of the lot, where I had been attacked by Jacob. “When you made me train in Alaska, for the longest time I didn’t see the point.”

He huffed a laugh. “I remember. You were a huge pain in the ass about it.”

“You weren’t the easiest teacher, either.” My mind drifted to the time he’d dropped me off in the middle of the forest with only a knife. He’d told me he’d give me a ten-minute head start to find my way back home as he had loaded his paintball gun. “If I shoot you in the heart or head, you lose and we’ll do this again tomorrow. You’re allowed four shots anywhere else on the body. If I get you more than four times, you lose and we’re back here tomorrow,” he had said to me. It had taken me four fails to realize the point for that particular training exercise and how to win. I’d made the mistake of trying to outrun him, always heading in the same direction back to the cabin, and because of that, he’d always cut me off. On my fifth try, I’d taken my

head start to cover my tracks and hide. After Logan had passed, thinking I was trying to outrun him to the cabin again, I walked back to his truck. When I saw that he'd left the keys inside, I'd realized what he had been trying to teach me. A few hours later, after he'd walked all the way home through the forest, he had come inside and smiled at me. "Good job, Shi," he had said. "Never take the obvious road. It's why X caught you every time you tried to escape through the front door. You need to teach your mind to slow down when you're in danger and think."

I pointed to the other side of the parking lot. "Jacob attacked me there," I said. "Because of you, I was able to stop another terrible thing from happening to me."

He stared in that direction. "I wish that hadn't happened in the first place, but I see your point. I'm glad I taught you enough to stop that bastard from hurting you worse than he did."

I turned off the car and Logan followed me into Desert Stone. I caught him looking all around as we approached the front desk.

"Hey, Shiloh," Derek greeted me with a bright smile as he stood from his chair.

"Hi, Derek," I greeted back as we walked by.

"How are you doing? I heard you got hurt," he asked.

I pointed to my hairline next to my temple. "I fell and hit my head."

He pointed to his lip. "What happened here?"

I still had a tiny cut on my lip and my bruise was covered up with makeup. "It happened when I fell," I lied.

He grimaced. "Ouch. Take it easy in your class," he said and sat back down behind the desk.

Before I could say thank you, Logan pulled my attention back to him. "Your boyfriend is walking this way."

"Which one?" I asked him with a sly smile. He didn't think I was funny. I looked past him and saw it was Knox. My smile dropped and Logan noticed. When Knox approached us, I said, "Logan, this is Knox. Knox, this is Logan. You two spoke on the phone."

Knox shook Logan's hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Same. Thank you for looking out for Shi. Ian told me you stayed at the hospital with her until he got there," Logan said and I gaped at him. Why was he suddenly being charming and nice? He saw me and smirked. "What? You're clearly not dating this one."

Knox's brows rose slightly.

I was already regretting bringing Logan. "Are you sure about that?"

"When you saw him, you looked pissed," Logan pointed out.

"That's because he pissed me off," I snapped, feeling really heated.

"Shiloh—" Knox started to say.

I glared at him. "Stay out of it."

Knox stuffed his hands into his pockets, frowning.

Logan whistled as he stared at Knox. "Maybe you are dating my niece."

I noticed that Keelan had stepped out from the hall behind the desk. He smiled at me as he made his way over and I couldn't help but smile back.

Logan cursed as he looked from me to Keelan. "Of course it's the one with tattoos."

Cheese and rice. "You have tattoos."

"You just made my point," he said. "I'm not boyfriend material."

"I guess that means I'll never have any cousins...or I have ones I don't know about." I was just as surprised as Logan was when I said that.

Logan grinned down at me. "Watch it, kid, or I'll embarrass the hell out of you."

"You're already embarrassing me," I shot back and he got this spark in his eye that said, *Challenge accepted.*

When Keelan approached us and before he could say anything, Logan held out his hand. "By the love in my niece's eyes, that must mean you're her boyfriend."

Keelan looked at me, unsure what to say.

A mean smile stretched across my mouth as I looked at my uncle. "You know, Knox has tattoos, too. You just can't see them with all his clothes on."

Keelan's eyes went wide and Knox's frown only deepened.

"Really, Shi? Do you not know how that made you sound?" Logan asked, his tone angry.

Finally, I thought. I wanted him pissed off. "I don't care how it made me sound," I snapped. "If you don't like it, then knock it off. You're using people I care about to get a rise out of me. Why? Because you want to know who I'm in a relationship with? I will tell you when I'm ready and not a minute before." I yanked my keys from my gym bag and forced them into his hand. "Take yourself home. I don't want you here." I was so mad at him. Probably more than this incident called for, and I had to get away from him before I exploded.

I walked away, going around the front desk, and dashed down the hall. I took a seat behind Keelan's desk in his office and tried to cool down. With my elbows propped up on the desk, I covered my face with my hands.

A hand smoothed over my thigh. "Hey."

I dropped my hands and looked to my right.

Keelan was kneeling on the ground next to me. He spun the chair I was in so that I was facing him. "You want to tell me what that was about?"

"I'm so angry with him. I was so happy and relieved he was here, but whenever he does something in the slightest to piss me off, I get so mad and I don't know why." Then it hit me. I knew exactly why I was so short-fused with him. "It doesn't matter right now because we have a class to teach."

"Fuck the class. You're more important."

"If I skipped out on things every time something upset me, I'd never get to do anything." I shook my head. "No. I enjoy teaching the class with you and I don't want to miss it."

He rubbed his finger back and forth on my inner thigh. "If you're sure."

I leaned forward and kissed him. "I am." I stood and we walked to the class, holding hands.

Knox and my uncle walked in toward the end of class and stood along the back wall. I had Keelan in a guillotine choke hold. Keelan didn't even pause as he finished up his explanation about the hold. Then he tapped my hip, his signal for me to release him, and I unlocked my arms from around his neck.

"Alright, that's it for today. We'll see you on Wednesday," Keelan said, dismissing the class.

Logan waited until the last student left before he reached into his gym bag and pulled out hand wraps. As he walked toward me, he tossed a set at me. "Wrap your hands," he ordered.

I caught them. "I'm not doing this with you. Not here."

"If you break your hand, I don't want to hear it," he said in a cold voice I hadn't heard since we'd lived in Alaska.

Angry, I unraveled the wraps. I looked from Keelan to Knox. They were watching us, looking a little worried.

"You really want to do this in front of them?" I asked as I began

wrapping one of my hands. Logan could be brutal when it came to sparring and to go toe-to-toe with him, I had to be just as brutal.

Logan didn't look up as he wrapped his own hands. "Scared of what they'll see when you get violent?"

The door opened then and Creed walked in. Today was his last day suspended from the swim team, which was why he was here and not at practice with Colt. He saw me and Logan, then looked at his brothers with a questioning expression. Knox flicked his fingers, gesturing for him to come stand by him.

I looked from them to Keelan, who stood on the opposite side of the room. "Don't interfere."

He frowned.

"Just stay out of it, please," I asked as I wrapped my other hand.

"Worried I might hurt your boyfriends?" Logan asked.

I glared at him.

"Now that's a pretty look," he taunted. "I don't know why you're so scared to tell me which one you're dating."

"I'm not scared. It's none of your business."

He moved toward me when he was done wrapping his hands and I moved away. "You grew an attitude while I was away," he said. "You sounded just like your sister there for a minute."

That was a low blow.

He turned his cheek. "Come on. I give you the first hit."

I didn't move. "Like I'd give you the upper hand and get within your guard."

"Fine."

He charged me, but I was ready for him. I threw my foot out, aiming for his chest. He smacked it out of the way and swung for me. I ducked to the side, grabbed his wrist, and jabbed my elbow toward his face. He caught it, which I was expecting, and I rammed my knee into his side. He let out a grunt and grabbed hold of my hair. He yanked it back, making me scream out. I quickly twisted to get to the far reaches of his guard and dropped to the ground, holding onto his wrist and forearm as I went down. Once I was on my butt, I threw my elbow down on his inner arm, forcing it to bend and him to get closer. When he was within my guard, I punched him.

He let go of my hair and stumbled back a couple of steps, rubbing his jaw. "You must really have your panties in a twist about something."

I got my feet under me and crawled backward.

“Shiloh,” Keelan said, his voice full of worry.

“Stay out of it!” I ordered.

“Maybe you should accept the help. You can’t take me on your own, Shi. You never could,” Logan taunted.

“Your attempts to get a rise out of me are pathetic,” I snapped. “Sounds to me like you’re just annoyed you can’t figure out why I’m pissed at you. Or is this a tantrum because you still can’t figure out who I’m dating? Poor Logan, the ex-Navy SEAL isn’t as sharp as he used to be.”

He chuckled. “I’m so proud of you right now.”

I pushed to my feet.

“You’re stronger. More confident,” he said.

I fisted my hands at my sides, not liking how things were shifting.

“I know you hit a bump in the road recently, but when we fall, we get back up stronger. You got back up stronger, Shi.”

How dare he use my mother’s words. “You don’t get to do that,” I seethed. “You don’t get to show up and pass judgment on my life based on the few hours you’ve been here. You have no idea how hard it’s been.”

“That’s it, isn’t it?” he asked. “You’re pissed I left.”

I ground my teeth.

“You know why I had to leave,” he said.

That was the lie that broke my control. I charged him. I swung. He ducked. “You didn’t have to do anything!” I screamed at him and swung at him again. He caught my wrist. “You lied to me!” I yanked my wrist free. “You left me when I needed you!” I went to shove him and he let me. He stumbled back a step. “You wanted revenge! Catching X was more important to you than me!” I shoved him again, but he braced for it. So I tried again. He didn’t budge. “You’re all I have left and you left me!” I slammed my fists on his chest and he caught me by my wrists. I choked on a sob. Tears were already pouring down my cheeks. “I needed you.”

Logan tried to wrap his arms around me, but I yanked out of his hold. “No! Don’t fucking touch me!” I stormed toward the door, passing a shocked-looking Creed and Knox.

“YOU LEFT YOUR SHOES BEHIND,” KNOX SAID AS HE STARED DOWN AT ME. “Keelan has them.”

I tightened my arms around my legs. “Okay.”

“Why did you decide to hide in here?” he asked me. “Keelan’s office is right across the hall.”

I was sitting behind his desk on the floor. “I’m not hiding.”

“That didn’t answer my question,” he grumbled.

Because I need you, I almost said. I hated that I had three wonderful guys who made me happy, yet I couldn’t stop feeling his absence. “I shouldn’t have come in here,” I said and got to my feet.

He didn’t stop me as I walked by and headed for the door. *Chase me*, I begged in my head. I made it all the way to the door and stopped walking.

Stop being a coward, Shiloh.

Instead of walking out, I spun around. I met Knox’s eyes. He was standing behind his desk, his hands in his pockets. “You said to me once that you only apologize to people you care about. You never came to me. You didn’t try to make things right with me. Or was avoiding me your way of telling me you didn’t want to?”

He looked away and I felt my heart crack.

“Did the other morning mean anything to you?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “It did.”

“Then why? Is it because I refused to sit back and let you dictate what’s best for me?”

“No.”

“Damn it, Knox!” I exploded, moving closer to him, leaving only the

desk between us. “Use your fucking words and tell me why you don’t want me!”

Anger etched his features. “I want you. I want you so bad it’s driving me insane!”

I held my arms out at my sides. “Then what’s holding you back?”

He pointed to the door behind me. “Them.”

“What about them?”

“If your relationship with them doesn’t work or if it causes a rift between them, they’re going to need someone who wasn’t involved to bring them back together,” he finally admitted.

There went the rest of my heart. Shattered. I wasn’t worth the risk to him and what was really messed up was that I couldn’t be mad at him for it. He was ensuring his family wasn’t going to fall apart. “Thank you for telling me,” I forced out and numbly walked out the door.

Creed and Keelan were standing in the hall. By their somber expressions, they had overheard. Keelan was holding my shoes.

I held my hand out for them and without a word, Keelan handed them over. “Can someone take me home?” I asked.

Keelan looked at Creed. “You take her home.” He tilted his head slightly toward Knox’s office door. “I need to be here a little longer.”

Creed nodded. The two of them were quiet as I put my shoes on and grabbed my gym bag from Keelan’s office. Once I was all set to leave, Keelan kissed my head goodbye and went into Knox’s office. Creed laced his fingers with mine and the two of us went home.

The next morning, I was getting my school bag packed when there was a knock on my bedroom door. “Come in,” I said.

Logan walked in about a step. “I was wondering if I could ride with you to your school. I have a meeting with your principal and then I have a few errands to run after.”

“Errands?” I said. “And what are you meeting my principal for?”

“I want to speak to him. There’s got to be a better way to keep you safe at school, and I also want to see if he ever looked at their security footage of when your tires were slashed at school.”

“I forgot about that,” I mumbled.

“You had a lot going on,” he said. “I reviewed the footage of when the sheriff attacked you. Unfortunately, he spoke too low for the camera to pick up his threats.”

“Great,” I said caustically.

“But we do have it recorded of him shoving his way into the house. I sent a copy of that footage to Ian and I made a copy for the lawyer I have a meeting with this afternoon.”

“You found a lawyer?”

He nodded. “We need to get ahead of this sheriff and we need to do it quickly, because it won't be long before he comes after you again.”

Fighting back my worry, all I could do was nod.

“Because you refused to talk to me, I spent most of yesterday evening watching the footage from the cameras outside,” he said.

I hung my bag on one shoulder. “I went to bed early.” Which was kind of true. I'd come home and shut myself in my room for the rest of the evening. I gestured to the hall. “We better get going.”

He moved to the side for me to walk ahead of him and I did. “I'd like to start over and properly meet your boyfriends. I was thinking we could all have dinner tonight,” he said as he followed me.

I stopped in my tracks in the center of the living room and turned to face him. “Really?”

“I know they're important to you. They were here for you when I wasn't. I would like to make an effort to get to know them.”

It was nice that he was trying to make an effort and I supposed it was his way of trying to make things right. “Alright. I'll invite them.”

The two of us locked up and headed to my school. Just as I pulled out of the neighborhood, red and blue lights flashed behind me.

“What did I do?” I asked Logan as I pulled over.

“You didn't do anything,” Logan said as he opened my glove compartment to retrieve my registration. “Just cooperate.”

I was scared, but Logan's calm demeanor helped me keep it together. I rolled down my window as two cops got out of the squad car. One went to my window and the other went to Logan's.

“License and registration,” my cop barked.

I held my hand out for my registration, which Logan was still holding. Logan leaned over to look at the cop at my window. “You going to tell her

why you pulled her over?”

“Speeding,” the cop lied. I had just pulled out of my neighborhood. I hadn’t had time to get my car up to the speed limit before they’d pulled me over.

“What’d you clock her at?” Logan asked.

“License and registration,” the cop barked again.

I wiggled my fingers at Logan. He had told me to cooperate, but here he was not doing that. Logan gave me the registration, but handed it over with his badge as well. I handed them, along with my ID, to the cop.

“You two with the sheriff’s department?” Logan asked.

“That’s correct,” the cop at my window confirmed with a haughty tone as he opened Logan’s badge bifold. The cop reacted slightly to seeing it, then looked at his fellow cop through my car.

Logan pulled his phone out of his pocket. “If you continue on with this intimidation tactic your boss, Sheriff McAllister, put you up to, I’m going to need both of your badge numbers right now,” Logan said, with this cold, authoritative tone.

The cop closed Logan’s bifold and handed everything back to me. “That won’t be necessary. It appears we pulled over the wrong car.”

School was...well, it sucked. I walked Logan to the principal’s office and then I went to find Colt and Creed before class started. For most of the day, it was as if I were outside my body looking in. This morning had rattled me and I couldn’t focus.

At lunch, as I sat with Colt, Ethan, Isabelle, and a few of Ethan’s football buddies, I felt the urge to leave. I wanted to get up and just start walking. I’d walk all the way home if I had to. The sound of Amber’s laugh two tables over only made the urge stronger.

“Where’s Creed?” Ethan asked. “I thought yesterday was his last day of lunch detention.”

“He’s meeting with our coach.” Colt sounded off when he spoke and that had me looking up at him. Colt’s eyes met mine and I saw the hint of sadness in his face.

I stood from the table and left the cafeteria. I made my way to the

building that housed the school's pool. The swim coaches' offices were located inside. When I entered the building, I spotted Creed sitting in the bleachers, staring at the school's giant pool.

I climbed up and sat on the bench next to him. "You okay?"

"I quit the team."

I'd had a hunch that was going to happen. Ever since he'd admitted he hated competing. These past two weeks being suspended from the team hadn't seemed to faze him. If anything, he'd been glad to have the excuse not to go to practice. "How do you feel right now?"

"Relieved."

"Then why do you look sad?" I asked.

"Because I'm worried he'd be disappointed in me."

I put my hand in his and laid my head on his shoulder. "Your dad?"

He nodded.

"He'd want you to be happy, Creed. That's what all parents want for their kids." I squeezed his hand. "Now, he probably wouldn't be happy with what I'm about to ask you."

"What's that?"

"Have you ever ditched school before?" I asked.

He snorted. "Yeah, why?"

"Will you ditch school with me and take me to get ice cream?"

He finally looked at me, surprise lifting his brows. "Right now?"

"Please?"

"What about Colt?"

"Of course, I always want him around, but would it be alright if you and I had some time to ourselves?"

Without letting go of my hand, he stood. "Let's go."

Creed called Colt once we were in his truck. As I sent a quick text to my uncle saying that he wouldn't need to pick me up, I listened to Creed tell Colt about how he'd quit the team and that we were leaving for the day.

"No, I'm not taking her on a date," he said into the phone. "I know you won the bet. We're getting ice cream and going home."

I smiled. I had forgotten about the bets they had made the last time we had raced. Colt had won the honor of taking me on a date first.

"Tell him he can take me on that date this weekend," I told Creed.

He passed on the message and they said goodbye to each other after that. Creed tossed his phone in the cupholder and pulled out of the school's

parking lot.

“Was he upset?” I asked.

“Not at all,” Creed assured. “He said to have fun and reminded me about the bet when I told him I was taking you for ice cream.”

“Have you two decided what you want me to dress as for the Halloween party?” Because I had lost the race, they got to pick whatever I wore.

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea to have a Halloween party, Shi. I don’t want to put you in a situation that will cause you distress.”

I loved that he wanted to put my needs first. They all did that. “What does a Halloween party entail?”

“It’ll be like Ethan’s party, but with costumes,” he answered.

Halloween was two weeks away. “I want you to have it and I want to go.”

Creed glanced at me, looking unsure. “What if something triggers an episode?”

I looked out the window. “I’m working on fixing that.”

“You went through something very traumatic that you still have difficulty talking about. I know you’re feeling better, but healing isn’t going to happen overnight.”

“I know that!” I snapped. Creed went quiet and I felt guilty for snapping. “I’m sorry.”

He removed one of his hands from the steering wheel and grabbed mine. “It’s alright.”

I laced our fingers. “I’m just so tired of missing out on things because of him. When I do, he wins. I don’t want him to win anymore.”

He brought the back of my hand up to his lips and kissed me there. “I think your uncle was right.”

I frowned at him.

He gave me a small smile. “You’re stronger.”

“I don’t know if I’m any stronger than I was before I hit rock bottom.”

“I wouldn’t say rock bottom. We wouldn’t have let you get that far,” he said.

“I didn’t want to live anymore, Creed,” I admitted.

His hand tightened around mine.

Guilt hit me. Maybe I shouldn’t have told him that. “I’m sorry if I upset you.”

He hit his brakes and turned down a short road that led to a park. After parking in a spot under a tree, he twisted in his seat to face me. “Don’t ever

be sorry for telling me what you're going through. I'm so fucking happy you're finally opening up. It just breaks my heart that you ever felt that way."

"I don't feel that way now and I'll do everything I can to not feel that way again," I assured him. "I know it's still hard for me to talk about that night." My thoughts drifted back to Saturday night and how I had gotten sick after telling them just a little bit of what had happened. "For a short period of time each day, I've been letting myself think of that night. Before, I pushed everything that had happened to the furthest corner of my mind and with all my might, I refused to venture there. I didn't want to remember what I felt, the pain, the fear, the overwhelming agony. Since I've allowed myself to take peeks, I do feel all of those things, but surprisingly, I mostly feel angry. Dr. Bolton says there are different stages of grief. I think I'm in the angry stage. I'm angry at Logan for leaving me when I needed him. I'm angry that I understand why he did it. If I had the opportunity to kill Mr. X, I'd do it. I'm, of course, angry at Mr. X. And I'm angry at myself."

"Why are you angry at yourself?"

"Because I took on the guilt of losing my family and I still do sometimes. I hate that I almost let fear destroy me. I get that there isn't a road map to acceptance and moving on. I get that some roads are longer than others and the decisions we make determine which road we take. I'm mad mine took me down a long one."

"The long road isn't so bad," he said. "I'll walk it with you."

I shook my head, smiling.

"What?" he asked.

"You say things that make me fall in love with you more and more."

His brows rose and the biggest smile stretched across his mouth. "You love me?"

Blushing, I looked out the window at the empty park. "Maybe."

I heard the click of him unfastening his seat belt before he grabbed my chin. He made me face him, his beautiful aquamarine eyes boring into mine. "I love you, Shi," he said and kissed me. I could feel the love he poured into that kiss as he devoured my mouth.

I unfastened my seat belt and crawled over the center console onto his lap. He reached down to the buttons on the side of the seat and it moved back, giving us more room. His hands went to my bare thighs and slid them up under the skirt of my dress until they reached my butt.

I trailed kisses down his neck and I knew I'd found his special spot when

his fingers squeezed my butt over my underwear.

“I’m guessing this means ice cream will have to wait?” he said.

“Maybe you have something I want to lick more,” I said, brushing my nose against his ear.

He groaned. “I see Keelan has corrupted you. Remind me to thank him later.”

Smiling, I returned my lips to his. “You’re just as dirty.”

He moved a hand between my legs and rubbed me through my underwear. “There’s nothing bad about being dirty. Especially if it gets your panties this wet.” He pushed my underwear to the side and his fingers slid over my clit to my core. He pushed two fingers inside of me and cursed. “I wish I could have you naked.”

I pecked his lips. “You’ll have to use your imagination.”

As he pumped his fingers in and out of me, he said, “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

I rocked my hips, meeting the thrusts of his fingers.

“Will you ride my cock the way you’re riding my fingers?”

I smiled. “There’s only one way to find out.”

He pulled his fingers from me and grabbed his wallet from the center console. He pulled out a condom and tossed his wallet onto the floor without a care.

I scooted toward his knees and unbuttoned his pants. I reached inside of his boxers and pulled his hard cock free. As I stroked him, I held my hand out for the condom. “Can I put it on?”

He handed it over with a smirk and leaned the seat back a little. He got comfortable with his hands laced behind his head as he watched me tear open the foil packet. I rolled the condom down his shaft and scooted up his lap. He didn’t take his eyes off me as I aligned him with my entrance and eased down. His smirk dropped and his hands flew to my hips. “Fuck,” he drawled.

I put my hands on his chest as I sank lower and lower. Once he was fully sheathed inside of me, I exhaled. “I’ve never been on top before. Do I just bounce?”

His body shook with silent laughter and he tucked my hair behind my ear. “Just do what feels good to you.”

“I want you to feel good, too.”

“Whatever you do will feel good. Trust me.”

Biting my lip, I lifted up and slid back down him. That felt good, but it

was missing something. I lifted up again and rolled my hips as I slid back down. That made us both groan. I did it again and again. He squeezed my hips, urging me to go faster and to slam down onto him harder. So I did.

“There you go, Shi,” he praised before leaning up to kiss me. “Do you love riding my cock?”

“Yes,” I panted. I felt my orgasm nearing and I chased it. “Creed,” I breathed. “I’m going to cum.”

He thrust his hips up, setting me off. I fisted his shirt and my head fell to his chest as I came apart. Just as my orgasm began to subside, Creed hooked his arm around my lower back and flipped us.

I let out a little yelp as he laid me on the seat. He threw my ankles onto his shoulders and began driving into me with hard thrusts. I threw my arms above my head and grabbed a hold of the head rest, needing something to hold onto because he was fucking me toward another orgasm. “Fuck!” I cursed.

“You’re gonna cum for me again, Shi,” he said as he pounded into me.

My legs shook uncontrollably and my toes curled in my shoes as I came again.

He grunted as he came, his thrusts turning into short spurts until he stilled inside me. Both of us were sweaty and breathing laboriously. That didn’t stop Creed from leaning down and kissing me.

I laughed around his kiss.

He pulled away a little to meet my eyes. “What?”

“You have me bent in half,” I said, looking at my feet still resting on his shoulders.

He smirked down at me. “I hope it doesn’t bother you, because I plan on bending you in all sorts of ways when I fuck you.”

I looked forward to it.

FOR DINNER, I MADE SPAGHETTI. ALL THE GUYS ACCEPTED THE INVITATION TO come over, even Knox. I pretended not to feel awkward around him. Thankfully, Logan was less embarrassing and attempted to get to know them. He asked how they could own a gym so young, to which Knox explained that their father owned a construction company. They had sold it and used the money to buy the gym. That was new information to me. I also learned that Colt and Creed each owned a quarter of Desert Stone as well. They gave me apologetic smiles for not telling me. I let it go. I was desperate for dinner to go smoothly.

Somehow the mud run Desert Stone was sponsoring came up.

“Were you still wanting to do that, Shi?” Keelan asked. “It’s this Saturday.”

“Yes, I do,” I looked to Colt and Creed. “Keelan said he was in. Will you two run it with me, too?”

Creed looked at Colt and shrugged. “We’re in. Want to make it interesting and add stakes?” Creed asked.

I snorted. “I swear you two have a gambling problem.”

“I like that idea,” Keelan said. “We should definitely add stakes.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. Give me a few days to think of what I want when I win.”

“If you win, you mean,” Colt said, grinning.

Logan looked at Knox. “Don’t like getting muddy?”

“I can’t. Because we’re one of the sponsors of the run, I have hosting duties and I will be manning our table for new sign-ups,” Knox explained.

As we were all finishing up eating, I made the mistake of letting my

guard down.

“So how does it work?” Logan asked randomly.

“How does what work?” I asked.

Logan waved his fork at the guys. “Being in a relationship with four guys?”

Colt choked on his bite of food and began coughing as he beat on his chest. The other three were so stunned, Creed barely managed to pat Colt on the back.

I set my silverware down and looked directly at my uncle. “How’d you find out?” I didn’t bother denying it. What would be the point? And I wasn’t ashamed.

He leaned back in his chair. “I told you how this morning.”

I thought back to our conversations this morning. It took me a minute to weed through everything, but I found the answer. “The camera footage.” How many times had I kissed them goodbye on my porch in perfect view of the cameras? I thought the only one I hadn’t kissed in front of a camera was Knox. We had shared one kiss and it had been in my kitchen.

“If you wanted to hide your...*relationship*, you sure did a shitty job,” Logan said.

“I wasn’t hiding it,” I snapped.

“Really?” he drawled with a caustic tone.

“You think because I didn’t tell you, I was hiding it?” I scoffed. “You and Ian decided to make figuring out who I was dating a game. As insignificant as you made my love life feel, I let you play. I let you guess and I figured I’d tell you when I felt you were worthy of knowing.”

“I am your guardian, Shiloh—”

“You lost that right when you decided to leave me behind,” I interrupted him.

Logan slammed his hand down on the table, making the dishes rattle. “You’re being unfair.”

“Because I’m pointing out that you lied and manipulated me into feeling like I had to let you go? How fucking fair was it to me?!” I yelled, slamming my hand on the table, too.

“I don’t care how pissed off you are at me, you are still my responsibility. That means I need to know who you let into your life,” he snapped. “The last thing we need is for history to repeat itself.”

He might as well have ripped my heart out of my chest. That was how

badly what he'd said hurt. I didn't look away. I didn't blink, even when my eyes burned and tears flooded them. "You think Mr. X was my fault?"

Colt grabbed my hand. "Babe," he said, trying to get my attention, but I didn't look away from Logan.

Shock took over Logan's angry expression.

"You think I let him into my life so he could stalk me for years and murder my family?" I said, standing from my chair.

Logan shook his head. "No, Shi. I didn't mean it like that."

"Then how did you mean it?" I questioned. "That I only attract psychopaths? That I'm incapable of meeting someone who won't want to hurt me?" I covered my face as my tears ran down my cheeks.

I heard chairs scrape against the floor before arms wrapped around me. I could tell it was Keelan right away.

"I can't be here," I sniffled. I had to do right by me. I had to remove myself before things escalated, because I knew how easy it would be for me to spiral.

"Okay, baby." He ran his hand down the back of my head. "Colt, take her home. We'll follow you in a minute."

Keelan passed me to Colt, who began leading me away with his arm around me.

"Wait a minute, you're not taking her anywhere," Logan said.

I stopped walking and glanced back.

"Yes, we are," Knox said.

"What you just said to her, whether you meant it or not, was not okay," Keelan said in a deep and angry voice.

"She battles every day to not blame herself for what happened and you turned around and did it," Creed seethed.

Logan's gaze flicked to me and a coldness hardened his face. "They know?"

Colt's arm around me tightened, but I didn't react.

"Damnit, Shiloh!" Logan roared. "Do you have any idea of the danger you have put yourself in?"

I stepped away from Colt and turned to face my uncle fully. "I want you to leave."

"You're damn right I'm leaving. We both are," he snapped, taking a step toward me.

Both Knox and Keelan blocked his way.

Logan stared them down. "Get out of my way."

Keelan stood straighter. "You take one more step toward her and you and I will spar."

I saw the calculation in Logan's eyes. I knew what it meant. There was a possibility Keelan could take Logan, if Logan fought fair. But one of the first things Logan had taught me was that when it came to survival, there was no such thing as fairness. It was you or them. I wasn't going to sit back and watch Keelan get hurt.

"You think you can take me, boy?" I heard my uncle ask Keelan as I reached behind the TV and grabbed the gun hidden there.

Colt's eyes widened when he saw what I had. I stepped between Knox and Keelan.

Logan's gaze flicked to me, then dropped to my hand. "You going to shoot me, Shi?"

Knox, Keelan, and Creed looked at me. I briefly glanced back at them. "Wait for me outside."

Keelan looked like he was about to argue.

"Go," I ordered. "Please."

They slowly moved toward the door. I didn't take my eyes off my uncle as they did.

"What's the plan, Shi?" Logan asked. "Are you thinking ahead? Shooting me will only get you put in jail."

"I am thinking ahead. I think you're going to let me walk out that door and you're going to be gone by the time I come home in the morning."

"I'm not going anywhere," he said. "You aren't safe here."

"Then go stay with Ian, wherever he is."

"I'm not going anywhere without you."

I shook my head. "I'm not leaving with you, Logan." He took a step toward me and I took a step back. "Please, Logan," I begged as I squeezed my hand around the gun, scared to lift it to point it at him. "Don't put me in a position where I don't have a choice." I knew my uncle. When it came to my safety, things like reason didn't reach him, only the need to get me safe. I still had to try, though. "I won't kill you, but I will shoot you where it'll hurt. The foot or maybe the leg. Either one will keep you from getting your revenge on Mr. X."

"You really think I'd choose revenge over your safety?" he asked.

"I honestly don't know." My hand holding the gun shook a little. "I've

lost everyone, Logan. Don't take them from me, too."

He let out a frustrated noise and began pacing. "What do you think will happen if X finds you? What do you think he'll do to them?"

"He won't find me," I insisted.

"With how reckless you've been, I wouldn't be so sure." He stopped pacing and put his hands on his hips.

"He won't," I repeated.

"I hope you're right," he said. He nodded his head once. "Go."

I backed away slowly; the training he'd given me wouldn't let me give him my back. Once I stepped out on my porch, I saw the guys waiting for me there out of the corner of my eye.

"Goodbye, Logan," I said and walked away.

No one spoke until we were all inside the guys' house.

"I'm probably a minute from breaking down," I told them.

"Give me the gun first," Knox said, holding out his hand.

I nodded. I released the clip and placed that into his hand. Then I pulled back the slide and dumped the live round that was in the chamber into my hand. The slide snapped back into place with a loud click. I caught their impressed looks as I handed over the gun and bullet.

"Where are you going to put it?" I asked Knox.

"In my safe with mine."

My brows lifted. "You have a gun?"

"Why do you sound so surprised?" he asked.

"Because of how you acted when you found out I had one," I said.

"How many guns do you have?" Creed asked.

"I'd say a lot," Colt said. "You saw how big that gun safe was in her panic room."

"I do own a lot of guns," I said. "Most are hidden in different areas of my house. I keep one in my car. The rest are in the safe."

Creed cursed.

"They make me feel safe," I said a little defensively.

Creed held his hands up. "Have as many guns as you want, Shi. You clearly know how to use them."

I sighed as my thoughts returned to Logan. "That was rough."

Keelan wrapped an arm across my chest and rested his chin on the top of my head. "Ice cream or popcorn?"

I smiled a little. "Both."

He kissed the top of my head. "I'll go get that while you pick a movie."

Knox disappeared down the hall toward his bedroom as Keelan headed for the kitchen.

Colt grabbed my hand and pulled me against him. "Comedy or superhero movie?"

"Definitely superhero," I answered.

"DC or Marvel?" Creed asked as he picked up the remote to the TV off the coffee table.

I thought about it. "Surprise me."

Creed smirked. "Do you still have on the same panties?"

I blushed and shook my head. "I had to change them."

Colt looked from me to Creed. "So much for getting ice cream."

"We got ice cream," Creed said.

"Afterward," I mumbled.

Creed grinned proudly and asked, "Which panties do you have on now?"

"Joker."

"The best Joker it is," Creed said as he scrolled through their digital library on their TV.

I frowned. "By best, you mean Heath Ledger, right?"

Creed shook his head as he scrolled toward the Joker movie starring Joaquin Phoenix.

Colt chuckled and took a step away from me. "I think I'll go help Keelan."

"Chickenshit!" Creed yelled as Colt headed for the kitchen.

Colt flipped him off. "You'll realize your mistake when she's sleeping in my bed tonight and not yours."

I folded my arms across my chest as I stared at Creed.

Creed looked from his twin to me, taking in my expression. He cursed and scrolled over to *The Dark Knight* instead.

A NOISE WOKE ME. OR AT LEAST, I THOUGHT I HEARD A NOISE. I SAT UP FROM where I lay between Colt and Creed and looked around the dark room. The bedroom door was still shut and I couldn't see anything in the darkness.

Feeling silly, I lay back. Just as I closed my eyes, I heard the doorknob turn. As the door began to open slowly and light from the hall bled into the room, I reached for Creed and Colt. "Wake up," I whispered, grabbing their shoulders. Before I could shake them, I froze. Their skin was cold and wet.

The door opened wider, casting on us a beam of light. I looked down at my now-wet hands and saw that they were covered in blood. I looked from Colt to Creed, my breathing picking up as my wide eyes took in the horror. Their throats were cut and there was blood down their chests and soaked into the sheets.

"Wake up! Please wake up!" I screamed and shook Creed.

"Shiii...loooh," a voice sang from the hall just before the light was blocked.

I slowly looked back at the door and there he stood, knife in his hand.

Mr. X.

I shook my head, refusing to believe what I was seeing.

"I found you," he said and stepped into the room.

"No!"

"No!" I yelled, sitting up.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Colt’s voice filled my ear before his arms wrapped around me.

“Shit, she left her medicine at home last night,” I heard Creed say as the light flicked on.

I saw Colt first and nearly burst into tears. I grabbed his face as I straddled his lap. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you,” I thanked the universe before kissing him. I ran my hands down his neck and chest, just to make sure. “You were dead,” I said, wrapping my arms around his neck. “You both were.”

Colt rubbed his hands up and down my back, soothingly. “It was just a nightmare.”

“This one was probably the worst one I’ve ever had,” I said as I kissed Colt again. This time I ran my tongue along his lips, demanding entry. He put a hand behind my head and opened for me.

The bed dipped and Creed asked, “Do you want to talk?”

I broke the kiss and began to trail my mouth and tongue down Colt’s neck. “After.” I would tell them all about it after. Right now, I needed them. I needed to feel them—to connect with them—and to feel reassured, because the fear of losing them was still making me tremble.

“After?” Creed repeated.

I leaned back a little and pulled off the shirt Creed had lent me to sleep in before we’d climbed into Colt’s bed. I tossed the shirt away and glanced at Creed. “After,” I said again.

Creed’s brows were trying to touch his hairline, but then he recovered. “Alright, after.” He leaned over and kissed me.

Colt’s hands went to my breasts, cupping them as his thumbs brushed over my nipples.

I pulled away from Creed. “I need to tell you something before the three of us have sex.”

Colt looked concerned, but asked, “What is it?”

“I don’t think I’m ready to have anal,” I said.

I received stunned silence before Creed snorted behind me and he rested his forehead on my shoulder as he laughed. Colt was at least fighting not to laugh.

“I’m serious. A threesome can lead to double penetration and I don’t think I’m ready for that,” I said.

Creed erupted with loud laughter and Colt fell back on the bed, covering

his face as his body shook.

“Don’t laugh.” Trying not to smile, I playfully hit Colt in the stomach.

Colt flinched. “We’re not laughing at you. We just weren’t expecting you to say that.”

“I want to know how she learned about double penetration,” Creed said as he knelt behind me.

“I did some research,” I grumbled.

Creed moved my hair away from my neck and began kissing me there. “Did it turn you on when you did all this research?”

I tilted my head to give him better access. “Maybe.”

“Did you touch yourself?” he whispered in my ear, making me blush.

“With how red her cheeks are, I’d say that’s a yes,” Colt said, grinning up at me.

Creed chuckled. “And you call us dirty.”

“What I did wasn’t dirty,” I argued, blushing even harder. “It was clean because it was in the shower.”

They both chuckled. “You’re adorably sexy,” Colt said as he reached between my legs. His fingers found my clit right away and began rubbing me through my underwear.

“I want to know what she was picturing in the shower as she made herself cum,” Creed said.

“Both of you,” I answered honestly.

“And what were we doing?” Colt asked.

“Well...I was between you two,” I said.

Creed moved to the other side of my neck and kissed me there. “Between us like you are now?”

The corners of my mouth lifted. “No. I was on my hands and knees.”

“I think you’re just as dirty as we are, Shi.” Creed moved his hands to my hips. “Get into position. Show us,” he ordered as he pulled on me a little as he scooted back.

I moved between Colt’s legs on my hands and knees and Creed knelt behind me. “Did you imagine us taking you like this?” he asked as he pulled my underwear down to my knees.

I reached the band of Colt’s boxers. “Yes.”

Colt lifted his hips and helped me move his boxers down to the middle of his thighs. I looked up at Colt before dipping down to lick up his hard shaft.

He hissed and his hands went to the back of my head. “Damn, babe.”

“Condom?” Creed said behind me.

“Nightstand,” Colt said with a strained voice as I licked him again.

The bed moved as Creed reached for the nightstand and retrieved a condom. I’d started taking birth control yesterday. According to my doctor, it would take a week to become fully effective.

Grabbing the base of Colt’s cock, I took the tip of him into my mouth. I did a few shallow bobs before taking him in as far as I could.

“Fuck,” he groaned.

“She feel good?” Creed asked as he pushed a finger inside of me.

“Yes,” Colt panted as I continued to suck on him. “Did you teach her this?”

“Fucking Keelan,” Creed grumbled. He removed his finger from me and replaced it with his cock.

As he pushed into me, I had to take my mouth off of Colt. I put my forehead on his thigh, whimpering as Creed completely sheathed himself inside me.

“She’s so tight,” Creed groaned, his hand grabbing one of my hips. “Probably not as tight as she is here.” With the finger he’d pumped inside me, he rubbed my essences around my other hole.

My head lifted from Colt’s thigh. “Creed.”

Creed began rocking his hips, moving his cock in and out of me, as he continued to rub me. “You brought up anal and now I can’t stop thinking about taking you here.”

“I said I wasn’t ready,” I said with a shaky voice because what he was doing felt good.

“I respect that and we won’t do that tonight,” Creed said. “But I feel like I should give you a little sneak peek to ease your fears.”

“What’s a sneak peek?” I asked.

“Try to relax,” Creed said as he pushed his finger into my back entrance.

My breath hitched and I went still.

Colt stroked my cheek. “Relax, babe.”

Creed withdrew his finger as he withdrew his cock and pushed both back in simultaneously. I let out a loud, drawn-out moan.

Creed continued to slowly move in and out of both my holes. “That feel good, Shi?”

I nodded.

“Good. Now put Colt back in your mouth,” he ordered.

I did as he said and took Colt's cock back into my mouth. I bobbed and sucked on him. I even relaxed my throat to take more of him, which made him groan and fist my hair.

"Let me fuck your mouth, babe," he said, holding me still as he thrust his cock in and out, the tip kissing the back of my throat each time. I sucked and licked him each time he withdrew. "If you keep doing that, I'm going to cum in your mouth."

Wasn't that the point? Loving the way he was coming undone, I held his hips down and bobbed my head as fast as he had thrust into my mouth.

"I'm about to cum," he hissed and I didn't stop. "Babe—" His cock swelled just before jets of hot liquid filled my mouth. I quickly swallowed it down and released him.

Colt was panting with his hands fisted into his own hair. "You didn't have to swallow."

Creed, who had stopped moving, chuckled. "What a dirty girl." He began moving in me again and this time he didn't go slow. He went faster, harder. It felt so good, I almost couldn't stand it.

"Was I not supposed to?" I asked between pants.

"You can swallow my cum anytime you want," Creed said as he pounded into me and I felt my orgasm hurtling toward me fast.

Colt sat up and kissed me as I came. His lips muffled my cries. My entire body shook and shuddered. Creed withdrew his finger to hold me by both my hips as he chased his own release. He let out a grunt and thrust into me one last time, burying himself deep as he came.

With heavy breathing, Creed rested his forehead on the center of my back. "You okay, Shi?"

"Yeah," I breathed. "That was fun."

They both chuckled. Colt pulled up his boxers as Creed slid out of me and left the room to go to the bathroom. I climbed off the bed and my underwear fell to my ankles. I didn't want to put them back on because they were wet. Instead, I stepped out of them and searched for the shirt Creed had lent me. I found it by the foot of the bed and put it back on.

Creed returned from the bathroom and the three of us got back into bed. Snuggled between them, I told them about my nightmare.

LOGAN WAS GONE WHEN I WENT HOME THE FOLLOWING MORNING. DINNER from last night had been cleaned up and his stuff was missing from the spare bedroom. There was a note pinned to the fridge.

**Shi,
All I want is for you to be safe.
Call me and I'll always come.
-Logan**

I hated how things were between us. Even though I was so, so mad at him and I'd asked him to leave, I was still sad that he was gone.

I arrived at Desert Stone with minutes to spare before class started. "Hi, Derek," I said as I rushed past the front desk toward Keelan's office to drop off my gym bag.

"Cutting it close," he said back.

"I know," I said before dashing down the hall. Creed had taken me home from school. I might have been feeling a little frisky during the drive and teased the hell out of him with touches and kisses. He'd chased me inside my house and tackled me to the living-room floor. He'd returned the favor for the teasing with his tongue between my legs. The torture had felt like forever, but when he'd finally let me cum, my eyes had rolled into the back of my head.

After that, he'd thrown my legs over his shoulders and buried himself inside of me.

Once we'd been both satiated and lying next to each other, trying to catch our breath, I had said, "The movies are deceiving."

He had tilted his head to look at me. "What do you mean?"

"It is not comfortable having sex on the floor. I mean, it got the job done, but I wouldn't recommend it."

He had laughed and we had made out on that uncomfortable wood floor until it had been past the time for me to leave.

My legs were still shaking as I dropped my bag off in Keelan's office and headed back out. I was almost to the door where the class was held when an arm grabbed me around my middle, stopping me. Its owner ran their nose along my neck. "Keelan," I said, giggling, because there was no way this was Knox. "We're going to be late."

"Who's Keelan?" a familiar voice whispered into my ear.

Jacob.

I dropped my water bottle and tried to get out of his hold. He wrapped his other arm over the top of my arms and lifted me off the ground, carrying me down the hall that led to more classrooms and out of sight.

"Help!" I screamed before he covered my mouth.

He chuckled next to my ear. "It looks like you pissed some people off, Shiloh. The judge decided to let me go home until my trial. That is, if my new friend, the sheriff, doesn't convince the judge to throw out my case."

He made the mistake of trying to open one of the classroom doors because he had to release my mouth.

"Help me!" I screamed and got one of my arms free. As he tried to pull me into the room, I grabbed a hold of the doorframe. "Keelan!" I was going to have to let go of the door. I'd have to do it to fight him because no one was coming. Just as he yanked on me to get me to let go, the door swung open wide, revealing Knox.

He didn't hesitate in grabbing me and ripping me free from Jacob's grasp, which pulled us both out of the classroom. Knox shoved me behind him and grabbed Jacob by his shirt before slamming his fist into Jacob's face. Jacob crumpled to the ground and Knox followed him down to hit him again and again.

"I should fucking kill you for touching her!" Knox roared and punched him again.

People were beginning to gather and watch.

“Everyone, out of the way!” I heard Keelan yell before he pushed through the crowd. He took in the scene, from me to Knox pummeling Jacob. “Knox!” He grabbed his brother and pulled him off Jacob.

Knox struggled against Keelan, his rage overriding his good sense. I put myself in front of him, blocking his sight of Jacob, who rolled over, groaning. I grabbed Knox’s hand and held his wild eyes. “I’m alright.” Breathing laboriously, he tried to look past me. I brought his bloody hand up to cup my face. “Look at me,” I said firmly, and he did. “Hold me,” I pleaded. His hand twitched against my face before he moved it behind my neck and pulled me to him.

“Get out of my way!” Jacob roared behind me.

Knox went to go after him, but I dug my feet into the ground and held onto him. Keelan tried to go after him next. I grabbed him by his shirt just in time. “Let him go,” I barked. “He isn’t worth it.”

Keelan frowned. “We need to call the police.”

“No,” I said. “They won’t help us with him.”

“What do you mean?” Keelan asked.

I looked at the crowd, which was slowly thinning out. “Not here.”

He nodded. “I’ll get everything squared away here. Go to his office and I’ll meet you two there.”

I grabbed Knox’s hand and led him to his office. I pulled him into the bathroom and flipped on the light so I could see his hand. His knuckles were split, and blood was already drying on his skin. I cupped his cheek. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he said, his voice low and slightly detached. “Did he hurt you?”

“He didn’t have time.” I turned on the sink and led his hand under the water. I washed away the blood gently. I could feel him watching me the entire time. When all the blood had washed away, I turned off the water and grabbed a towel off the rack. I patted his hand dry. “I was prepared to fight him. I was ready to face what he might do to me in that room, alone. But when I saw you...I knew everything would be alright. I feel that way every time I look at you.” I brought his hand up to my mouth and kissed his knuckles. “Thank you for saving me.”

His hand twisted in mine and moved it to cup my chin. He tilted my head back to look up at him and he slammed his mouth down onto mine. Shock

held me for a breath until I kissed him back. He kissed like I remembered. Demanding. Controlling. This time I didn't rebel against him. I melted. I wanted to take everything he was offering, greedily. Because I was scared I'd never have this again.

When I realized that, I found the will to push against his chest and break away from him. "You cannot kiss me if you're just going to pull away," I said, looking down. I couldn't meet his eyes. I was scared of what I'd see. "You'll break my heart if you do."

"Look at me," he said.

It took a lot of strength to do that, but I did. I met his beautiful golden-brown eyes.

"Every time I look at you, I get a glimpse at happiness."

I held my breath, refusing to assume what that meant.

"You're my match, Shiloh." His hands framed my face. "I'm so fucking sorry if I hurt you. I let my fear of the worst get the best of me."

"Living in fear isn't living." That was what he had told me once.

"I should have taken my own advice."

I put my hand on his forearm. "I've been guilty of not listening to my own advice a time or two."

He leaned closer. "Will you forgive me?"

"Don't pull away from me again," I said.

"I won't."

I leaned in the rest of the way. His mouth covered mine and his hands moved to the back of my neck. This time when he tried to control the kiss with his tongue, I rebelled. My tongue lashed back at his in a sensual dance.

He smiled against my lips. "You just won't let me be in charge, will you?"

"You want to be in charge, you gotta earn it," I said against his lips.

He seemed to like the challenge and he kissed me again. His fingers tugged on my hair a little, making me gasp, and he gained the upper hand. He'd nearly made me swoon when we heard someone clear their throat. We pulled apart and found Keelan standing just outside the bathroom, grinning at us.

"Am I interrupting?" he asked.

Knox sighed through his nose.

"What did you do about the class?" I asked Keelan.

"I canceled the class today. As an apology for the inconvenience, I gave

them a month's free membership. Derek's crediting their accounts right now," he explained, sounding a little irritated.

"I'm sorry you had to do that," I said.

"It's not your fault, baby girl."

It kind of was.

"What did you mean earlier about the police not helping us with Jacob?" Keelan asked.

I told them what Jacob had said to me. How he had a guardian sheriff looking over his shoulder.

Both looked really pissed off the more I spoke.

"I hate to say this, but you're going to have to call your uncle," Keelan said.

Knox nodded, agreeing.

My shoulders slumped. I wasn't looking forward to that.

Logan knocked on my door later that evening. I let him in. "What's in the bag?" I asked, spotting the grocery bag in his hand.

He held it up. "Ice cream. It's a peace offering."

I bit my cheek and took the bag from him. "Would you like to have some now?"

He looked slightly surprised. "Sure."

He followed me into the kitchen. I grabbed two bowls from the cabinet and took the ice cream out of the bag. He'd gotten me strawberry, one of my favorites. He watched me as I began scooping the ice cream into each of the bowls and then slid one of the bowls across the island toward him.

He just stared down at it as I picked up my own bowl. "I need to say something before you tell me what happened today," he said.

"Go ahead," I said and took a bite.

"I have no idea how to be a parent or be accountable for anyone other than myself. Your mother always made it look easy." He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "When I became your guardian, I didn't know what the hell to do. I regretfully treated this guardian role as a mission. Get you better. Get you somewhere safe. Get you trained. That was my first mistake—to view taking care of you like that. I did you wrong by looking the

other way when you started drinking and again when you started smoking. I didn't know how to help you and the one person I would normally call for advice was gone." His eyes got glassy and he cleared his throat to regain his composure. "When I found all those empty bottles under your bed, I knew I really fucked up. I thought that if my sister was looking down on us, she would hate me. I tried talking to you about the drinking. You seemed to listen, but then you started running and I could see it was another unhealthy coping mechanism. I looked away again. Ian started calling about that time and told me about all the shit that was going down with X. I wanted to help. I wanted a chance to find X so I could make him pay for what he'd done to our family and make sure you were safe. I got it in my head that if I caught X, everything would be okay. You would be okay. When we sparred the other day, you made me realize how epically I have failed you and I don't know how to express how sorry I am."

I set down my almost-empty bowl and exhaled heavily. "I haven't been handling things with you in the best way, either. Instead of talking to you, I lashed out. I'm not very proud of myself for that."

"You had every right to lash out like you did. I responded poorly to it, especially last night. I didn't mean what I said. I don't blame you at all for what X did. I promise. I just want you to be safe."

"I know you do," I said, eyeing his untouched ice cream. "Your ice cream is melting."

Logan didn't remove his hands from his pockets. "I changed my mind. Now, what happened at the gym?"

I put my hand to my chest as I looked from his bowl to mine. My eyes briefly flicked to the carton of ice cream next. There hadn't been a plastic seal on it. How hadn't I noticed that? It took everything in me not to react. Everyone had repeatedly told me I was a terrible liar. Right now, I needed to be the best liar there was, because my gut was telling me that I was in danger. I grabbed his bowl. "Since you're not going to have any, can I have it?"

"Go ahead," he said.

As I dumped his ice cream into my bowl, I asked, "Can we go sit in the living room? My body is a little sore from where Jacob grabbed me." I picked up the bowl and my cell phone off the counter.

He nodded. "Of course."

As I came around the island, I gestured for him to walk ahead of me. He hesitated at first, but eventually moved with me a step behind him.

“So like I said on the phone, Jacob showed up at the gym...” As soon as we were passing the hall to go into the living room, I dropped the bowl of ice cream and ran toward my room. I made it and slammed my door behind me.

As soon as I turned the lock, Logan began banging on the other side. “Shi, open the door.”

I leaned against the door and clicked the home screen on my phone. I pulled up my last calls and clicked on Keelan’s name. The phone rang once before he picked up.

“Hey, baby girl,” he answered.

“Help me!” I screamed. “I think he drugged me and is going to try to take me away.” Just as I said that, I felt lightheaded.

“We’re coming,” he said.

I shook my head, hoping to clear it, and dashed for the window. I kept having to shake my head to keep focused as I unlocked it and pushed the window open. I kicked the screen off and began to climb out. I had half my body out when a hand clamped around my wrist.

I screamed as Logan tried to pull me back inside. “Someone help me!” I screamed outside and I thought I heard gravel crunching underfoot.

I was beginning to feel disoriented and kind of high as I fought to get out the window. Just as Logan was about to get the upper hand and pull me back in, Creed appeared, then Colt, and they grabbed me. Logan suddenly let go. I glanced back to see Keelan had him in a choke hold on the ground. As the twins pulled me out through the window, I saw Knox run into my room. My legs gave out on me the moment my feet touched the ground. Colt scooped me up into his arms and walked with me to the front of the house.

“I’m going to check on Knox and Keelan inside. Get her out of here,” Creed said to Colt.

Colt rushed to their house and grabbed his keys from the bowl by the front door. Then he booked it to his car, put me in the passenger seat, ran around to the driver’s side, and climbed in. Colt got the car turned on and tore away down the road.

“I feel drunk and high,” I groaned.

Colt grabbed my hand.

“Where are your brothers?” I asked.

“They’ll meet up with us later,” he said.

The inside of the car was spinning, and I had to put my head between my legs or I was going to be sick. “I’m so dizzy.” I focused on breathing in

through my nose, out through my mouth. “Do you think they’re alright?”

He didn’t answer.

“Where are we going?” I asked instead.

“I’m going to take you to our cabin.”

Cabin? Oh, right. The cabin they were planning to have the Halloween party at.

“I cannot believe he tried to take me,” I mumbled. “Never mind, yes I can. I should have been suspicious when he let me go last night.” My eyes began to feel heavy.

I must have fallen asleep, because when I opened my eyes again, I was in a bed. I didn’t recognize the room, but there were wooden beams in the ceiling and bright sunlight coming from a sliding glass door that led to a balcony. Through the glass door, I could see trees everywhere.

“Shi! Colt!” I heard Creed yell from somewhere.

Someone groaned and I rolled over, finding Colt asleep in the bed next to me. Just as I was about to sit up, the door to the room burst open and Creed stormed in.

“Why haven’t you been answering your phone?!” Creed yelled, startling Colt awake.

“What?” he said, sitting up.

“What the fuck, bro?!” Creed roared.

Colt grabbed his phone off the nightstand and cursed. “It’s dead.”

Events from last night started coming back to me. “What happened? Where are Knox and Keelan?”

“That’s why I’ve been trying to call you,” Creed said, and he got this sullen look on his face. “Keelan’s in the hospital.”

To be continued.

KNOX

I WATCHED HER EYES FILL WITH HURT. SHE LOOKED LIKE SHE WANTED TO CRY, but she stayed strong. “Thank you for telling me,” she said with such detachment. I squeezed my fists at my sides to keep myself from reaching for her. No matter how much I wanted to be with her, I couldn’t. I had to let her go.

She slowly turned around and walked out of my office. I heard talking in the hall. I assumed she’d run into my brothers. I ignored them the best I could and took a seat at my desk. My phone buzzed in my pocket. It was a text from an employee, calling in sick for tomorrow’s shift. The last thing I wanted to deal with was texting everyone to see if someone wanted to come in.

My attention was pulled away from doing that when I heard my office door close. I glanced up and saw Keelan standing by it. He gave me a look he had given me many times whenever I’d done something he’d disagreed with. “You’re being a dumbass,” he said bluntly.

I frowned at him. Why had I been given little brothers who loved to test my patience? The twins were the worst, but Keelan had his moments.

“You want to be with her and—”

“I’m not talking to you about this,” I snapped.

“I’m done being patient with you when it comes to her,” he snapped back. “You’ve never looked at or reacted to anyone else like you have with Shiloh. I think you love her and your reason for not being with her is stupid.”

“We’ll see how stupid it is when your relationship falls apart because one or all of you become jealous and I’ll be the only one fighting to repair this family.”

Keelan shook his head. “If that ever happened, you wouldn’t be there to bring us back together. Eventually, as you watch us be happy with her and have with her what we all know you want, it’ll be you resenting us.”

His words had me taken aback.

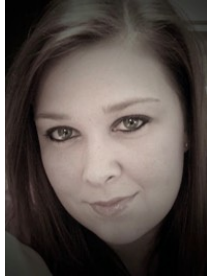
“Stop using us as an excuse to deny yourself a chance to be happy,” he said and stormed out.

I was left sitting there, frowning at my desk. Keelan had managed to make me question everything when it came to Shiloh and what I’d thought was the right thing to do.

WITSEC BOOK 3

Coming Soon!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ashley N. Rostek is a wife and mother by day and a writer by night. She survives on coffee, loves collecting offensive coffee mugs, and is an unashamed bibliophile.

To Ashley, there isn't a better pastime than letting your mind escape in a good book. Her favorite genre is romance and has the overflowing bookshelf to prove it. She is a lover of love. Be it a sweet YA or a dark and lusty novel, she must read it!

Ashley's passion is writing. She picked up the pen at seventeen and hasn't put it down. Her debut novel is *Embrace the Darkness*, the first book in the Maura Quinn series.

You can find out more about Ashley and her upcoming works on social media!

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