

CODENAME: SCORPIUS

THE
WICKED
STING

APEX TACTICAL BOOK THREE

CANDICE WRIGHT



The Wicked Sting

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Apex Tactical Series

Book 3

Candice Wright

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by Candice Wright

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For Julia

*For coaxing me out of my cave and checking to make sure I'm alive when I
disappear for weeks on end.*

Chapter One

Avery

I twist the rings hanging from the chain around my neck while waiting for the waitress to finish topping up my coffee.

“There you go. Give me a shout if you need anything else.”

“Thanks,” I tell her softly, tugging my hood a touch lower.

Her smile drops. Her frown showing her concern as her hand rests lightly on my wrist. “Is everything okay?”

This is the fourth time I’ve been here in the last month and she always asks me if I’m okay.

I swallow at the tone of her voice. It feels like it’s been forever and a day since someone gave a shit about me. I offer her a small smile and nod. “I’m good. Thank you, though.”

Knowing I’m not going to say anything else, she nods and makes her way back over to the counter. I turn to gaze out the window as the hazy early morning sun bathes everything in a warm glow. For a moment, I think about abandoning my coffee in favor of standing outside and letting the sun warm my face.

I could close my eyes and pretend I was somewhere else—anywhere else—but here, drowning in the memories that haunt me. I twist the rings as my eyes slip closed, and for a brief moment, I let myself feel it all. Each kiss, each whispered, *I love you*, each lie that scorched itself into my skin.

With a shiver, I open my eyes and turn away from the orange hue coating the street. It would take more than that to thaw the ice running through my veins right now. I promised myself I would keep focused. There is no place for the past in my life anymore. I have to keep moving forward. I can’t change what’s happened, but there is still the possibility of changing what will come.

Today is the day. I’m not going to chicken out this time.

A flash of light as the sun reflects off metal has my head snapping around to see a car turning into the diner’s parking lot. Even if I hadn’t seen the reflection, I would have known they were here. I always had an innate way of tracking them. It’s as if a part of them still resides inside me. I dip my head but keep my eyes on the car, feeling my pulse quicken when it comes to a

stop.

For a second, everything slows around me. My heart thunders in my chest, and my mouth fills with saliva as I decide whether I should throw up or pass out.

When the driver's side door opens, and a tall, handsome man with sable brown shoulder-length hair steps out, I have to bite my lip to stop a whimper from escaping. The passenger door is next. I turn my gaze to the second man who gets out. His hair is shorter and darker than the driver's. His frame is leaner, too, but no less strong. He says something before laughing, slamming the door closed as he flips the driver off. He turns to look at the window.

Before our eyes clash, I look down at the steaming cup of coffee in front of me and pretend I'm someone else. Just another girl killing time instead of a woman trying to piece together a heart that the two men outside broke. I don't look up when I hear the bell above the door. Instead, I twirl the rings around my neck as if they alone have the power to keep me in the present.

See, here's the thing about having a broken heart: When someone hurts you, it doesn't magically make you stop loving them. Love can't be flicked on and off like a fucking light switch. What they did broke me—shattered me into a million tiny pieces, but each piece still holds the memories of what made us *us*.

Even now, I can feel the happy moments float to the surface, wanting me to remember how blissfully unaware I was before I realized that the home I built was nothing but a house of cards. My anger, hate, and even my pain taint how I view our history. But the echo of their voices in my head as they fed me lies will stay with me forever.

Still, even after all that, I can't pretend I don't care, can't feign indifference when they're nearby, can't maintain my grip on my sanity when I hear them speak to the waitress.

A tear slips free and slides down my cheek before dripping onto the back of my hand as a sense of hopelessness washes over me. They had once given me a place to heal. Now, when they're near, I feel shattered all over again.

Reaching for my cup with a shaky hand, I take a sip of my too-hot coffee, burning my tongue in the process. I welcome the pain; it focuses me, giving me the strength to look over at them from under the safety of my hood.

Daniel "Hawk" Michaels and Thomas Creed: The only two men I've ever loved. One, my husband, though I wore both their rings. The other, my future baby daddy. Or at least that was the plan.

I almost laugh when I think about how naïve I'd been. I mean, they actually flipped a fucking coin to pick who I'd bed and who I'd wed. I didn't even blink an eye. I wanted them both so bad that I would have given them everything they asked for. And for a while, I did.

I can hear them talking, the deep cadence of Hawk's voice rumbling over my skin, but I can't make out the words he's saying. The sound that used to lull me to sleep now haunts my dreams.

Jesus fuck! What am I doing here? There has to be a better way to do this than placing myself back in the line of fire.

The bell above the door goes again, drawing my attention to the young couple bickering as they enter. The girl gestures wildly to the guy, who shakes his head and sighs before sitting down in the booth in front of mine and grabbing the menu.

"All I'm saying is, it's pretty fucking suspicious, and you know it. You can't be mad at me for asking. You told me we were going on a road trip. That this would be the beginning of the rest of our lives. You said you came back because you love me, but for the last three days I've hardly seen you. You left me in a hotel room all alone and when I text or called, you never replied until this morning."

She's pissed, but I can hear the hurt in her voice beneath the anger, so I open myself up a little as I listen in.

"For fuck's sake, Carly. This has to stop. You can't accuse me of shit every time I leave. I have a job to do. Without trust, we have nothing. Maybe I should just take you back. I love you, I risked everything for you, but I deserve better than to be treated like this," the man replies. His answer makes my skin hum, like touching the prongs of a tuning fork.

He's lying.

"I'm sorry," the girl cries. "I'm just scared, and the thought of you leaving me is tearing me apart."

"I'm not going to leave you."

Lie.

"But you have to stop with all the craziness. I don't want anyone else. I only want you."

Lie.

"I'm sorry." She sniffs as he makes a soothing sound.

"It's okay. I think in time you'll learn what kind of man I am. I know you've had problems before, but you can't keep projecting them onto me. It's

unfair to paint me as the bad guy when I'm one of the good ones."

Lie.

Anger pumps through my system as this asshole gaslights the crying woman into believing everything is her fault. If I thought it wouldn't bring attention to me, I'd throw my coffee in his face.

"You're right. I'll do better. Just don't give up on me."

I tune them out, unable to listen any longer without resorting to violence. I sip my coffee and remind myself of all the reasons I'm here.

I might not like Hawk and Creed anymore, and hell, they obviously don't like me much either, but I refuse to let that stop me from doing the right thing. It's not about us anymore. It's so much bigger than that.

The screech of a chair pushing back jolts me out of my thoughts. I see Hawk making his way to the bathroom at the back. Turning to look at Creed, I watch as he scans the place the way he always did, no matter where we were.

I dip my head again. He might not recognize my body hidden under my baggy clothes, but there's no way he would see my eyes and not know it's me.

I still remember the day I met him.

I was so focused on saving the ridiculously overpriced coffee I'd just spent thirty minutes in line for that the folder I was carrying in my other hand ended up on the floor with its contents spread out for the world to see. Luckily, it wasn't anything of importance, just updates on policies and procedures and all the boring stuff that comes with changing jobs. Well, I wasn't changing jobs per se. It was more like moving up after completing my internship. But from all the nerves swirling around in my stomach, it was kind of the same thing.

The coffee shop is crammed, hence the long line. Surprise, surprise, nobody offers to help me. I resist flipping everyone off, which is unusual for me. I don't usually have that much restraint. Instead, I focus on bending down in my tight skirt and high heels without breaking my neck, ripping my skirt, or flashing my panties. All of which has happened to me before.

Fun fact about me: I'm a klutz. My mother, who was once a classically trained ballerina, would tell anyone who would listen that I got everything from her but grace. I couldn't argue with her. I'm tall and lean, which is kinder than saying I have a flat ass and am an active member of the itty-bitty titty committee. I also inherited her long blonde hair and big blue eyes, which

are a tad too large for my face, making me look like an anime character.

Grace, though? Yeah, I didn't get any of that. I trip over air, have zero spatial awareness, and because I like to make things that much harder on myself, I tend to walk around with my nose in a book. I regularly walk into trees, streetlights, people, and, more often than not, traffic. I've broken my nose twice, my ankle, leg, wrist, ribs, fingers, and toes, and all that was as an adult. I was ten times worse as a kid. The dreamer in me thought I could fly if I just believed hard enough. It took a barn roof and a week-long stay in the hospital to make me realize there was nothing special about me. Or so I thought.

"Hey, let me help you with that."

I lift my head and choke on air—another one of my skills—when a man who looks like he stepped out of one of my books graces me with a smile.

"I um..."

"I'm Creed, and you are?"

I stare at him, unsure how to proceed. Most people would say their name, but I'm tempted to tackle him before blurting out my whole life story and my single status.

"You do know who you are, right? You didn't hit your head or anything?"

"Huh? Oh shit, no, I'm dumb. I mean, I'm Avery. Nice to meet you. And thank you for the help."

"You're welcome."

He hands me some of the scattered papers, his fingers touching mine briefly, and I swear to God, I feel a spark. And what's that noise? Yep, I think I hear a harp playing in the background. Alright, Cupid, you win. Hit me with the good stuff.

"Stupid Cupid can kiss my ass," I mumble as the lying asshole at the booth in front of mine makes his way to the bathroom, pulling me out of my walk down memory lane.

Tossing some cash on the table, I wait until I see Creed stand and make his way to the counter. A cell phone rings, but after I realize it's not mine, I make sure my hood is tugged down, and I stand.

"What?" The woman says, making me pause.

There is silence for a second before she hisses, *"His wife? I don't understand."*

I feel my heart lodge in my throat for her. What a lying piece of shit.

“No, no, that can’t be—a daughter?” She sucks in a sharp breath before making a sound like a wounded animal.

“Sure. I’ll tell him.” Her voice is robotic now—no signs of the pain she’s feeling at all.

I’m tempted to keep going and leave while I still have the chance, but something makes me hesitate. Maybe it’s because I know what it feels like.

She gets to her feet and grabs her bag, her eyes clashing with mine for a second before she rummages inside for something.

I turn when I hear whistling. The asshole, oblivious to what just happened, walks out of the bathroom with Hawk right behind him.

A sense of foreboding washes over me as Creed turns from where he stands at the counter to say something to Hawk.

The asshole keeps heading our way, and when he sees his now ex-girlfriend standing up with her bag in her hand, he frowns. “Now, what’s your problem?”

She pulls her hand from her bag and points a gun at him. I freeze, my eyes darting around the room as everything seems to somehow slow down and speed up at once.

“Whoa, Carly, what the fuck are you doing?”

His loud voice draws the attention of Hawk and Creed. The waitress behind the counter gasps when she sees the gun.

“You have a wife?”

The dickhead pales before shaking his head, his eyes darting to the cell phone on the table. “You answered my phone?” he snaps.

“You have a daughter.” Her voice breaks, and Jesus, her pain is so palpable it hurts my chest.

“Now, Carly—”

“No!” she screams at him, the gun in her hand wavering as I see Creed edge closer.

I can’t see Hawk anymore, but I know he’s here somewhere, looking for a way to defuse the situation before it gets worse.

“You lied to me. You’re just like the rest. You made me think I was going insane.”

“Just put the gun down, Carly, and we’ll talk, okay? I love you.”

Lie.

“You’re a liar.” The resignation in her voice makes the hair on my arms stand on end.

I start to move toward Creed without thinking. I hear the gun cock, and in a blur of movement, I see Hawk taking the cheating asshole to the ground as the gun is fired. I throw myself at Creed, covering his body with mine as a bullet rips through my back.

Creed's eyes collide with mine and widen as he grabs me to stop me from falling. "Avery?"

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I hear a roar before the darkness swallows me whole.

Chapter Two

Creed

I hold Avery tightly to me as she passes out.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” the shooter gasps before turning the gun on herself.

“Stop!” I yell. Hawk dives toward her feet as she fires again. Her body hits the floor just as Hawk reaches her.

“Call a fucking ambulance!” I yell at the waitress as I lower Avery gently to the floor.

I shove back the hood she’s wearing, letting her blonde hair spill out. I press my fingers against her neck and find her pulse strong and steady.

“She’s dead,” Hawk calls out.

I look up at him as his head turns my way, and his gaze drops to the woman lying in front of me.

“Avery? What the fuck?” He scrambles over to us, his hands roving over her body, looking for injuries.

“We need to check her back.” I swallow the bitter taste in my mouth. “She covered me.”

Between the two of us, we gently roll her. Hawk curses before ripping off his flannel and pressing it against her. “Looks like it hit her shoulder. There’s no exit wound, though, so she’s gonna need surgery to get it removed. What’s her breathing like?”

I dip my head and watch the rise and fall of her chest. “Breathing looks okay,” I tell him as I press my fingers against her pulse once more. The steady thump, thump, the only thing keeping me from losing my shit right now.

“Good. I don’t think the bullet hit her lung. What the fuck is she even doing here?”

“I don’t know, but you can be sure as shit I’ll be asking her when she wakes up,” I snarl back at him.

“I can’t be here. I need to go.”

I turn at the sound of the other man’s voice and see him staring down at what’s left of his girlfriend’s head.

“Sit your fucking ass down. You wanted to play with people’s emotions?”

Well, this is the fucking consequence.” He looks at me before he swallows and sits down on the floor, tugging his knees to his chest.

It seems to take a lifetime for the ambulance and police to get here. When they do, they refuse to let us leave until we’ve told them what happened.

“Look, I get that you’re just doing your job, but my wife was just fucking shot. I need to get to the hospital. So if you have anything else, call, and we’ll come down to the station,” Hawk states, crossing his arms.

“Fine, but don’t leave town,” the pissed-off cop replies.

“Nice way to speak to witnesses,” Hawk growls before stomping away.

“Asshole,” the cop mutters, making me whirl on him.

“Do you have any fucking idea who we are?” I step up to him, going toe to toe. “Apex Tactical is always willing to help the boys in blue when they need it, just like we help with search and rescue. It’d be a shame if we stopped doing that because of your piss-poor attitude. Can’t imagine your chief would be impressed to find out why either.”

His face pales as he tries to backtrack, but I hold up my hand to cut him off. “I understand you’re just doing your job, but we are not the enemy here.”

His shoulders deflate as he sighs. “I’m sorry. In my defense, I just walked into a crime scene where all the men are standing and two women have been shot, one of them fatally.”

I blow out a breath. “I’m sure you’ve seen your fair share of domestics. I get it. I’m sorry I can’t give you more, but I honestly wasn’t paying much attention to them until she pulled the gun. What I did get was that the dead woman just found out her boyfriend has a wife and kid. I’m sure he’ll leave here today and crawl back into his wife’s arms like none of this happened.”

“Be a shame then if I had to go to his house to ask some follow-up questions, huh?”

I grin and nod. “Real shame.”

My smile drops as I look to the door, where Hawk is waiting impatiently for me.

“We need to go,” I tell the cop.

“It’s fine. I have what I need. But I’ll be by the hospital later to get the victim’s statement.”

“Avery. Her name is Avery Michaels-Creed.”

His eyes move from mine to Hawk’s, registering the mix of our names, but he doesn’t ask.

“Alright, thanks.”

I make my way to the door and follow Hawk as he heads to the car. The engine is running by the time I jump in, and the second I close the door, he pulls out and speeds toward the hospital.

“I thought that fucker was going to keep us there all day.”

“He apologized. I get the feeling he’s seen one too many cases of domestic violence, and that scene in there triggered him.”

“I don’t give a fuck. Avery is in the hospital after getting shot, and we might as well have been doing our fucking laundry.”

I shut up because when Hawk’s like this, it’s better just to let him work through it.

We drive in silence until we pull up outside the hospital forty minutes later.

“Want me to call the guys?”

“No point yet. Not until we know more.”

“They’ll be pissed we didn’t tell them.”

“Right now, I don’t fucking care. We both know they’re just as mad at Avery for leaving as we are. They aren’t exactly going to be rushing here with flowers and Get Well Soon cards.”

I frown at him as I climb out of the car and wait for him to join me. “She took a bullet for me, Hawk. I think they’d be grateful for that, at least.”

“Grateful that you’re okay. Sure. But I don’t see them caring that she was shot.”

I shove him, making him stumble. “What the fuck is your problem? You make it sound like they wouldn’t care if she lived or died. That’s not who they are, Hawk, and you know it.”

His hands fist at his sides as he glares at me.

“Or is it you that doesn’t care?” I step closer and watch his jaw clench. “You wish she was dead, Hawk?”

“It would be fucking easier,” he yells, whirling around to face away from me as he tugs his hair.

“If she was dead...”

“Then she’d have a good reason for not coming back.”

I shake my head and walk away.

“Don’t pretend that you didn’t think the same thing over the years,” he shouts.

There was a time when my worry morphed into anger. When my fear that something had happened to her drifted into *hoping* something had happened,

as sick as that sounds, it was the only way to move forward. Otherwise, we had to admit that she'd simply walked away.

"Maybe, but that was before I looked into her eyes as she took a bullet for me. She might not be ours anymore, but I'd rather know she was safe somewhere out there in the world—even if that means seeing her with someone else—than in a wooden box six feet under."

"Guess that's the difference between us, then. Because I'd rather see her dead than with someone else."

He storms into the hospital, leaving me to question whether coming here was a good idea. Hawk is a loose cannon at the best of times, but when Avery is added to the mix, his sanity goes completely out the window.

I make my way inside and follow the directions to the second floor. I find Hawk sitting on one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs with his head in his hands. I sit next to him, but I don't say anything. He'll talk when he's ready.

We sit in silence for an hour before he speaks. "I lied. I don't want her to die. She can't fucking die." He looks at me, his eyes dark with anger and fear. "I'm so fucking pissed at her, Creed, but she can't die."

"She won't. She's strong. You know that."

He blows out a breath and leans back.

"If she's back, we need to warn James. We have no idea how or when Astrid's vision might come true," I remind him.

"Shit. I forgot."

So did I until we sat down. When Astrid was in the hospital after nearly getting flayed alive, she had a vision of her friend James with a woman over him while he bled out. A woman that she was able to identify thanks to a photo that Hawk still carries around in his wallet of the three of us.

"You just wait here in case the doctor comes out with news. I'll let the others know."

I walk out and down the corridor, where it's quiet, before dialing Evander's number. As the resident tech guru for Apex, I know he'll have everyone up to speed with what's going on before he even hangs up his phone.

The phone rings a few times before he answers. "Creed. Everything okay?"

"No. There was a shooting at the diner earlier."

I hear movement in the background as Ev curses, "Fuck, are you and Hawk alright?"

“We’re both fine. It wasn’t anything to do with us. Some cheater got caught. His girlfriend pulled a gun and got a couple of shots off.”

“He make it?”

“Hawk got to him as she fired.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“The gun was aimed my way. Someone stepped in front of it, though, and took the bullet for me.”

“On purpose?”

“Yeah. Then the gunwoman shot herself in the head.”

“Christ.” He taps something on his keyboard. I can hear his fingers moving rapidly over the keys.

“Who was the other person that was shot? If they saved your life, the guys are going to want to—”

“It was Avery,” I cut him off.

There is nothing but silence now. Ev never met Avery. She had already left before he joined the team. But he still knows all about her and about what she did.

“Wow. I mean, I knew she’d turn up. She had to if Astrid was having visions about her, but I didn’t expect it to play out like this.”

“You and me both, Ev.”

“Interesting, though.”

“What the fuck is interesting about my wife being shot and nearly killed?”

“Maybe the fact that you and Hawk were so convinced she played you. Doesn’t sound like the actions of a player to me.”

He hangs up without saying anything else. He doesn’t need to. His words echo around my head. Why would she do that? The woman who took a bullet for me is the same one who left without looking back.

Avery has always been an enigma. I’d met her purely by chance in a coffee shop. Something about her drew me in like a moth to a flame. She was sweet and beautiful. And beneath her polished exterior, there was something about her that never ceased to make me laugh. She was such a contradiction, but that was part of her charm.

I get lost in my thoughts as I make my way back to the waiting room. Hawk looks up but sighs when he sees it’s me and not a doctor.

“I take it nobody has been out yet?”

“No. But no news is good news, right?”

I sit beside him and run my fingers through my hair. “How do you want to play this?”

He looks at me with a frown. “What do you mean?”

“When she wakes up, and she will, how do you want to handle it?”

“What’s to handle? She made her choice. I want her to be okay, but there is no place in my life for her anymore.”

“And what about if I want more than that?”

He snorts. “You think she’ll stay? She already ran from us once.”

“She’ll need time to heal, and I have a dozen questions for her.”

“Well, neither Oz nor Zig will want her at Apex. There is no way they’ll trust her around Salem and Astrid.”

“Jesus, we’re not talking about a violent fucking criminal here. Her only crime is leaving us.”

“I know that, but trust is a big deal to Oz and Zig, and you can’t fault them for it. We can’t trust her as far as we can throw her. A lot can change in four years, Creed. You have no idea what she’s capable of anymore.”

“I know she’s capable of stepping in front of a bullet.”

He shrugs casually as the door opens, and the doctor walks in, and we both stand.

“How is Avery, doc?”

“Your wife is in recovery. We had to go in and remove the bullet, which thankfully missed anything vital. It did fragment, which caused some damage to the muscles and tendons. Though the damage was minimal, she’ll be in quite a lot of pain for a while. I want to keep her in for a few days to monitor her and watch out for signs of infection. She’ll need some physical therapy to make sure she gains back mobility and range of motion, but beyond that, she should make a full recovery with no lasting side effects.”

“Can we see her?”

“For a little while, but she really does need to rest.”

We both nod and follow the doctor to the room where Avery is.

“If you have any questions, I’ll be back in about an hour to check on her.”

“Thanks, doc.” I offer him my hand, which he shakes. Hawk just stands there, distracted by the sight of Avery.

With a shaky breath, I turn and watch as Hawk walks into her room, his eyes never leaving her, and I follow him inside. He steps up to the side of the bed, careful of the wires and tubes attached to her, and reaches for her hand. His much larger one swallows it up as he sits down in the chair and holds it to

his cheek.

“She’s cold.”

I walk to the bottom of the bed, unfold the blanket draped over her feet, and carefully tug it up over the thin, off-white sheet covering her. I tuck it around her before I move to the other side of the bed.

She’s so fucking pale, she could give Astrid a run for her money. But she looks peaceful, though the dark circles under her eyes tell another story.

I cup her jaw and slide my thumb over her bottom lip, remembering how she used to taste. It’s something that’s tormented me since she’s been gone. I thought what we had was something special, but somewhere along the way, it all went wrong.

“She came here for us.”

Hawk looks at me and frowns. “What makes you say that?”

“Why else would she come back? She has no family or friends here. She could be anywhere in the world, yet she came back to the very place she ran from.”

“Maybe she heard about Cooper and Kay.”

They had taken her under their wing from the very first time they met, giving Avery the mom and dad she always wanted, not the ones she had. They’d been just as hurt as we were when she left. Cooper might be dead now, thanks to his actions, with Kay following behind him weeks later after losing her battle with cancer. But once upon a time, they loved her something fierce.

“I don’t see how she could know that. Who would tell her?”

“Maybe they left something for her, and their lawyers tracked her down.”

As far as I know, their house has been gathering dust since they died. None of us have been able to go there other than to close it up. The memories of a man we once trusted shitting all over us were still too much to process.

“We’ll just have to ask her when she wakes up,” Hawk says, looking down at Avery.

“And if she doesn’t want to answer?”

He glances up at me, his eyes hard. “I can be very persuasive.”

Chapter Three

Avery

I open my eyes and groan. Man, I hate hospitals. What the heck did I do this time?

My eyes fall on the person beside me, and I frown because I have no idea who he is. The guy is sexy, I'll give him that. With tan skin, broad shoulders, and dark, messy hair that begs to be played with. I've never seen him before in my life, and yet something about him gives off a military vibe, just like Creed and Hawk.

Creed and Hawk. Holy shit.

I bolt upright and cry out as pain radiates through my body, nearly making me pass out.

The man in the chair jumps up and gently helps ease me back down. "Whoa, easy, Avery. You'll do more damage to yourself if you're not careful."

I feel tears run down my cheeks, but no way in hell am I going to attempt to lift my hand and wipe them away.

"Shit, don't cry." His thumbs wipe away my tears, but the gesture is so sweet that it makes me cry more.

"Are you in pain?"

I manage a small nod.

He looks at something beside me before cursing. "Fuck it. I'm not supposed to do this, but you need it. You're on a pain pump, Avery. I'm just going to..."

The pain begins to ease a little, meaning I can breathe again.

"There you go. Better?"

"Yes, thank you."

"You want some water?"

"Please."

He pours some water from a jug into a plastic cup with a straw before lifting it to my lips. I drink greedily, realizing just how thirsty I was when the cup is empty.

"You want more?"

"No, I'm okay. How do you know me?"

He sits back down in the chair before offering me a gentle smile. “My name is Evander, but my friends call me Ev or E.”

“Nice to meet you, but you didn’t answer my question.”

“Only because I don’t want to upset you.”

I take a closer look at him and notice his tight black T-shirt and combat pants before my eyes move down to his boots. “Creed and Hawk sent you.”

“Not quite. Visiting hours are over, after all, but one of the nurses here is a little sweet on me.”

I cock my brow at that, making him grin.

“She’s sixty-seven and happily married. I think she and her husband have made me her hall pass guy.”

I burst out laughing at that, regretting it immediately.

“Shit, sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. It’s my fault. I forgot.” I don’t think I’ll be forgetting again anytime soon.

“If they didn’t send you, why are you here?”

“I’m curious about you.”

“You’re curious about me?” I frown.

“Mm-hmm...”

“What are you, the Cheshire cat?”

“Otherwise known as Apex’s IT guy.”

“Do Oz and Zig know you’re here?”

“Nobody does.”

My stomach somersaults at that.

“Crap, I didn’t mean for it to sound like that.”

“Okay, tell me why you’re here exactly. And if you try anything, know I will squeeze your balls off while I scream loud enough to pop your eardrums.”

He cups his dick and blanches. “I want to get to know you. Or I did until you threatened my dick. Now I’m not so sure.”

“Why? If you wanted to know something about me, you could just ask Creed and Hawk.”

“They’re surprisingly tight-lipped about you. They were destroyed when you left.”

I laugh at that, ignoring the pain as my new friend morphine skips through my bloodstream. “Sure, they were. I bet they cried all over you.”

He frowns at me, leaning forward until his arms rest on the bed. “I’m not

blowing smoke up your ass here, Avery. I might have joined Apex after you left, but that doesn't mean I didn't witness some of the fallout. You broke their hearts. There have been no women for either of them since you've been gone."

"They tell you that?" I huff.

"It's not a secret. They never bring women home—never even mention them. There is only you."

"Look, you seem like a nice guy, E. But just because you don't see them with other women doesn't mean there aren't any."

He's quiet for a minute, and I think he's conceding my point until he speaks again. "You left them, Avery," he says softly.

"Did I?"

He frowns, his eyes moving over my face in question, not that it will help him. One of the flip sides of my ability is that I can lie with the best of them. I have zero tells and know exactly what to say or how to say it to make it believable. I just don't do it. Something about it makes me feel dirty.

Besides, hearing lies day in and day out is exhausting. It made me much more eager to tell the truth, and if that's not an option, I won't say anything at all. I just wish everyone had learned that skill.

"Did something happen to you, Avery?"

I laugh, but it doesn't stop the tears from flowing once more. I turn away from E—the pain in my shoulder almost nonexistent, I love morphine—and close my eyes.

"It doesn't matter anymore, E. It's in the past."

"If that's true, then why did you come back?"

"To warn you about the baby."

"Baby? Salem's baby?"

But I can't answer him. My mouth doesn't seem to work anymore, and my eyelids are too heavy to keep open.

* * *

The next time I open my eyes, E is gone, and in his place is Hawk. His eyes are closed, so I slowly take him in.

A cough from the doorway makes both of us jump as Creed walks into the room with a cardboard tray of cups. "You're awake."

I blink but don't say anything. Instead, I fight the urge to throw myself out the window to avoid the inevitable confrontation.

"Are you in pain?"

I don't want to show them any weakness, so I shake my head but do a lousy job of hiding my wince.

"Liar."

Hawk reaches over and hits my pain pump before he stands, towering over me. "What are you doing here, Avery?"

I don't know how to answer that, not yet. Everything is still too jumbled in my head.

"So, you're going to give us the silent treatment now? Real fucking mature," Hawk snaps.

I fist the sheets and squeeze my eyes shut, hoping they'll take the hint and leave. But, of course, they don't. They never do anything I want them to.

"Why did you do it?" Creed asks gently, making my eyes snap open when I realize he's moved closer. "You could have been fucking killed. If you ever pull a stunt like that again, I'll spank your ass so hard you won't be able to sit for a month."

I suck in a breath at that because he's not lying. I narrow my eyes at him. "I couldn't let you get shot."

Hawk makes a noise from beside me when I finally speak, but I don't look at him. I'm trying to do everything I can right now to not fall apart.

"Yes, you fucking can. You are never to do something so fucking idiotic again," he roars. I look toward the window, but his hand grips my jaw, turning me to look at him. "Oh no. You do not get to shut us out. Not this time."

"What do you want, Creed? I'm tired. I'm sorry I took a bullet for you. It won't happen again." Assuming that nobody shoots at him while I'm around, that is. I couldn't stand back and do nothing. I've never been that person. Too many times when I was a kid, people stood and witnessed the shit I went through, and they did nothing, said nothing. Which made them just as fucking guilty as my bullies.

"I want to know why!" he shouts, making me jump and grimace again.

"I told you why. I couldn't let you get hurt, okay?"

"Why did you leave?"

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing him to fucking go away. "I'm tired. I'd like you both to leave now."

“You are a fucking coward, Avery. All you ever did was run and hide. I don’t know why I expected more.”

His words make vomit rush up my throat, but I swallow it down.

“You don’t know anything about me, Creed. You never did. Say what you want. It’s nothing I haven’t heard before.”

“Fuck this, let’s go.” Hawk stands and walks to the door, yanking it open before turning to look at me. “Do me a favor, Avery. Next time, stay fucking gone. Nobody wants you here.”

He stalks off as my eyes sting with unshed tears.

Creed stares down at me, his jaw clenched so hard that it looks like it hurts. “I don’t know why you did what you did. I’m not happy because you put yourself in danger doing it, but I’m still grateful.” He swallows hard before continuing. “He’s angry that you left us. It’s hard for him—seeing you like this after so long—it’s hard for both of us.” He turns away from me to look out the window. “Just tell me it was worth it. That you’re happy. Tell me that, at least.”

“I’m not sure what happy even is anymore, Creed,” I admit in a whisper as my eyes start to feel heavy once more.

“These drugs are going to kill me,” I murmur.

“Nothing is killing you.” His voice seems far away now.

“It’s okay. There’s nobody left to miss me anyway,” I tell him before I let the darkness sweep me away again.

When I come to this time, I crack open my eyes to find it’s dark. The door to my room is open, the bright lights of the hallway spilling in enough for me to make out the large man sitting beside me.

“You’re back.”

“I wanted to check on you,” Evander replies.

“By watching me sleep?”

He shrugs. “You looked peaceful. I didn’t want to disturb you.”

I don’t point out that he could have come back tomorrow. But, to be honest, I could use the company. I’m so tired of being alone.

“I’ll admit I’m surprised to see you. Hawk and Creed made it clear they wanted me to disappear.”

“I’m sure they did, because if you stay, they’ll have to admit a few things to themselves.”

I frown. “Like what?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing for you to worry about. Can I ask you a few

questions?”

“I can’t guarantee I’ll answer, but you can ask.”

“You mentioned a baby before. Were you talking about Salem’s baby?”

“I don’t—” I try to ease myself up but gasp when the pain makes me feel like puking.

“Shit, hold on. Let me help you.” Before I can protest, Evander’s arms come around me, and he lifts me gently into a sitting position. He leans me forward so that he can move the pillows before leaning me back.

I sigh in relief as he sits back down on the chair.

“Do you need me to press the pain pump?”

“What? No. It will only knock me out.”

“I can come back—”

I grab his arm, which is resting on the bed. “No. I’m fine.”

I blow out a breath as I try to get my thoughts in order. “Who is Salem?”

His eyes widen at my question. “She is Oz and Zig’s woman. When you said baby, I thought you meant hers because she’s pregnant.”

“What does she look like? Describe her to me.”

He frowns, a look of suspicion crossing his features.

“Please, Evander. Just tell me what she looks like.”

He hesitates for a moment before replying. “She’s pretty. She’s short, though everyone is short to me. She has warm blondish brown hair and really pretty eyes. One is brown with copper running through it. And the other is—”

“Green,” I cut him off.

“How did you know that?”

“Is she gifted, Evander?”

He stands abruptly. “Why did you ask that?”

“Just answer me. Is she fucking gifted?”

His silence is answer enough.

“Shit, shit, fuck. I wanted her to be wrong just this fucking once.”

“Who? Avery, you’re not making any sense.”

“Sit down, Evander. This might take a while.”

He sits back down slowly, his eyes never leaving my face.

“I don’t know who Salem is by name. I only know what she looks like through the eyes of a six-year-old girl.”

He sucks in a breath, his elbows leaning on the bed.

“Bella is a pre-cog.”

“A pre-cog?”

“A precognitive sees the future.”

“Shit, she’s like Astrid,” he whispers.

“Astrid? Wait, does she have white hair and violet eyes by any chance?”

He curses before he jumps up and starts pacing. “She tell you that? This kid who sees things?”

I nod. “In a roundabout way.” I can’t tell him everything. Not yet, or they’ll lose their collective minds.

“Are you here to try and take Salem and Astrid from us?”

I jolt, ignoring the pain in my shoulder. “No. I would never do that. Jesus, Evander. I came all this way to help them, not hurt them.”

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?” His words sting, but I can’t blame him for asking.

“You don’t. But I had to take the chance you’d listen to me anyway.”

He runs his fingers through his hair before sitting back down. “Start from the beginning.”

“When I was eighteen, I started working as an intern for a new government-funded company that specializes in locating missing people, specifically children and teens. At twenty-one, they hired me on full-time, and although the job was hard, it was rewarding too, you know? We dealt with everything from kidnapping to sex trafficking. We made a difference, Evander.” I need him to know that much, at least.

“I took a leave of absence when I got married and moved out here until I could figure out what to do next. We all know how that turned out.” I blow out a breath. “When I went back, I was offered my old job back, but in a new department on a different floor. At the time, I didn’t care. I threw myself back into work, focusing on these kids that had seen horrors I could hardly stand to think about. That’s all that mattered to me. But helping them heal from both the mental and physical scars inflicted upon them started to take its toll on me.” I lick my lips, my mouth feeling dry.

Evander surprises me by slipping his hand over mine, offering me his strength. “You were so young. That’s a lot to deal with.”

“No it wasn’t. Those kids found the strength to survive what happened to them. It was my fucking honor to be a part of their journey from hell to salvation.” I turn to look out the window, seeing nothing but an inky black, starless sky.

“It took me a while to realize the new department was different. The children they were looking for were different too.”

“How?”

I turn back to look at him, my eyes tracing over his deep frown. “They were special like Salem and Astrid.” *Like me.*

“Bella has described Salem and Astrid before, but I never put two and two together.”

“Why are you back, Avery?”

“Bella saw something, and I had to come, just in case. She saw two boys with the same face. She told me they were sad because someone had hurt the baby. When I asked her which baby, she said the one in *her* tummy.”

“She didn’t recognize Salem? You said she’d had a vision about her before.”

“If she did, she didn’t say. And trust me, I asked. She just kept calling her, *her.*”

“Did you get anything else?”

“Yeah. I asked her if she knew where the baby got hurt, and she told me it was in the pretty house called Apex.”

“Fuck.”

Yeah, that one word pretty much sums it up completely.

Chapter Four

Hawk

I knock back my drink before slamming my glass down on the bar and signaling to the bartender for another.

When someone sits on the stool beside mine, I turn and snarl at them before I realize it's Greg. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

When the bartender pours me another whiskey, Greg tells him he'll take one too. He doesn't say anything else until the man leaves to serve someone at the far end of the bar. "You want to talk about it?"

"Nope. I want to get drunk and forget this shitty week ever happened."

"Alright. Cheers." He clinks his glass against mine before taking a large swig of his drink.

The fucking bastard doesn't say anything else. He just sits there. He knows if he pushes me, I'd leave. Instead, he waits for me to spill my guts. It makes me want to both thank him and punch him.

"I'm fine, G. It's gonna take more than the reappearance of my wayward wife to push me over the edge."

"And yet here we are, in a bar in the middle of the afternoon."

"It's five o'clock somewhere, right?" I throw back the rest of my drink before ordering another.

"Creed send you?"

"Haven't seen Creed all day. I figured you'd both be at the hospital, but Ev said you were both no-shows today."

I snort. "E's keeping tabs on us now?" I say, taking a drink.

"No. He's at the hospital keeping tabs on your wife."

That brings me up short. "What the fuck?"

"You didn't think we'd stay away, did ya? Whatever our feelings, that woman saved Creed's life without a second thought for her own. So it didn't work out between you all. Boo-fucking-hoo. You don't have to like her, Hawk, but you damn well better be grateful. Because without her, you'd be burying your best friend." He finishes his drink before standing and nodding to the bartender.

Swallowing the rest of my whiskey, I pull out my wallet and toss enough

cash on the bar to cover my tab and Greg's drink before I stand and follow him outside.

"Where are you parked?" he calls over his shoulder.

"I caught a lift."

"Thank God for that," he mutters, pointing to his car. "Come on, I'll give you a ride."

I don't argue. I just walk over to where he's parked.

"Have the others been to see her?"

"Besides you guys, only Ev has been. He says she's a little leery at the thought of having the others around."

"What the fuck does she have to be leery of? It's not like anyone is going to hurt her, for fuck's sake."

"Honestly, Hawk, when a woman is healing from a fucking gunshot wound, she gets to call the goddamn shots." He climbs in and slams the door.

I growl and yank my door open before climbing in beside him. "What is your fucking problem, G?"

"My problem is dipshit males thinking they know everything. Did nobody learn anything over the whole Astrid fiasco?"

"This is not the same, and you know it. She was my wife. My fucking wife. And she walked away like her vows meant nothing. And now she's back, four years too late. You're right, though. I'm more grateful than I'll ever be able to express that Creed is still here because of her. But beyond that, she means nothing to me."

He looks over at me before starting the car. "Then have Creed serve her with divorce papers and let her go."

My hands clench into fists as I resist the urge to knock him out.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." He pulls out of the parking lot without another word.

I stare out the window, my mind all over the place, as I consider the merit of Greg's words. A divorce means we'll be free. It might not be my name on the marriage certificate, but she took my name alongside Creed's. She belongs to both of us, and as such, we'll never truly move on until Creed signs the divorce papers and we both sever all ties with her.

The problem is, a divorce will set Avery free too, and that pisses me off more than anything. I like her bound to us. I like the fact that she can run as far as she likes, but she's still tied to us both in the most fundamental ways. There will be no more husbands while I still have breath in my lungs. That's

her penance to pay.

I'm so lost in thought that I don't realize where we're heading until we pull into the parking lot. "Not in the mood for this, G."

"So, stay in the fucking car. But I'm going to see her." He climbs out and slams the door, leaving me to look at the hospital looming in front of me.

"Fucking motherfucker." I punch the dashboard before climbing out and slamming the door closed.

I don't bother trying to catch up to Greg. I might be tempted to wrap my hands around the bastard's throat. When I make it to her floor, I spot Ev in the hallway, leaning against the wall with his phone to his ear.

He must sense me because he looks up and ends the call before I reach him.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Ev? You don't even know Avery."

"I wouldn't be so quick to throw stones if I were you."

"Yeah? And why's that?"

"Tell me, Hawk, how well do you know your wife?"

I grab the front of his shirt and push him against the wall. "You don't know dick about me and Avery, so I suggest you shut your mouth before I shut it for you."

He shoves me hard, making me stumble back. Ev is the least confrontational of all of us, but that doesn't mean he'll back down when he feels strongly about something. And after the way everything went down with Astrid, I know he'll fight harder.

"It's like that, is it? Tell me, Hawk. What does Avery do for a living?"

"She works with kids. A social worker or teacher or something. What the fuck does that have to do with anything?"

He shakes his head at me and scowls before walking away.

"What is your fucking problem?" I yell after him. He turns and flips me off before heading toward the elevator.

I blow out a deep breath and count to ten before pushing the door open a crack.

"I'm sorry," Avery cries before she's wrapped up in Greg's arms.

I grip the door handle, still hating to see her tears even all these years later. Seems I'm not as immune to her as I hoped. And that pisses me off more. I walk in quietly and close the door before leaning against the wall.

"None of it matters now, Avery. Take it easy, sweetheart." He soothes his hand up and down her back. If it were anyone else, I'd throw a fit. But Greg

is protective of all the women in a fatherly way. After losing his daughter when she was fifteen, nobody begrudges him that.

Eventually, he pulls back, wiping the tears from Avery's face, before sitting down in one of the chairs near the bed. That's when she spots me and jumps. I see the exact moment the mask slips down over her face.

"You told me to stay away. How am I supposed to do that if you won't leave me alone?"

I ignore her comment and ask a question of my own. "You know when you're getting out of here yet?"

"Tomorrow, hopefully. Happy?"

"Ecstatic."

"Where are you staying, sweetheart?" Greg asks her while throwing me a dirty look.

"I... Umm..." She looks from Greg to me before snapping her mouth shut.

I bark out a laugh. "Good enough for your pussy, but not your address, huh?"

Greg leaps up and stalks over to me. He doesn't say anything before pulling his arm back and punching me in the face.

My head snaps to the side as Avery shrieks. I wipe my mouth, blood coating the back of my hand, as I turn back to look at her. "Fuck it. You want my sloppy seconds, Greg? Have at it."

"You son of a bitch." Greg throws another punch, but I catch his fist and twist him around, wrapping my arm around his neck.

"This what you want, babe, men fighting over you? First, Ev in the hallway, and now Greg? You must be better than the mediocre fuck I remember." I shove Greg away before yanking the door open.

"You come back, and I'll gut you," Greg snarls as I storm out.

I don't bother with the elevator. Needing to blow off some steam, I jog down the stairs, whipping out my cell phone when I get to the parking lot. I dial Creed and wait. I'm just about to hang up when he answers.

"Where the hell are you? Greg said he tried calling you, and you didn't answer."

"Yeah, I've had no signal. What's going on?"

I sigh and sit on one of the benches. "Nothing. I just got into it with him. Well, him and Ev, actually. They're all over Avery like a fucking rash."

He's silent for a minute. "You been drinking?"

My first instinct is to tear into him like I did Greg and Avery, but acid swirls in my gut. This is Creed. The one person who has always had my back no matter what.

“I’ve had a few.”

“And you went to the hospital?” His voice is strained as I dip my head and run my free hand through my hair.

“I fucked up,” I admit.

He sighs but says nothing else. What’s there to say? There is a reason I don’t usually drink. I’m a mean drunk, like my old man was.

“You’ll fix it, Hawk.”

“Not this time, Creed. Fuck. I’m such a prick.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s one of your best qualities.”

I let out a laugh before leaning back. “Where are you anyway? Greg said you’ve been missing all day.”

“I went to the cabin.”

“The cabin? Shit, I forgot about that place. Last time I was there, it was falling apart.”

“I’ve fixed it up a little and cleaned it. It’s not too bad now.”

“But why?”

“She’s going to need a place to stay. And like you said, she won’t be welcomed back at Apex.”

“I’m not too sure about that anymore,” I mutter.

“What?”

“Nothing. Anyway, with the way we ended things yesterday, and hell, after how I just spoke to her, you’d have to knock her out and kidnap her to get her there.”

He’s quiet. Too quiet. And he’s only like that when he’s plotting.

“Creed? You’re not kidnapping Avery. Are you sure you’re not the one that’s been drinking?”

“Is it even kidnapping if it’s your wife?”

“Yeah, Creed, I’m pretty sure it’s still a felony even if the woman is married to you.”

“Look, all we need is a little time away from the others to get the answers to the questions we’ve spent four years asking ourselves.”

I wipe my hand down my face and grimace. Am I actually considering it?

“Hypothetically, if we did kidnap her, how would we get it past Oz and Zig? They’ll expect us to be back in rotation.”

“I was thinking about that. With everything that went down with the shooting, I haven’t had a chance to tell them we’ve wrapped up the Duggan case early. As far as they know, we’ve gotta fly back out to Georgia tomorrow.”

“Fuck, Creed. This is a bad idea.”

“I know, but it’s the only idea I’ve got. Something tells me if we don’t do this, she’ll slip through our fingers again, and this time it will be for good. I have to know why she left, Hawk. And it’s eating me alive.”

“Fuck. Fine, but we can’t tell anyone.”

“Agreed. We’ll deal with the fallout later. But if things play out the way I hope, they’ll never know.”

Something tells me that’s not gonna to happen. If I were a betting man, I’d put money on this whole thing blowing up in our faces.

Chapter Five

Avery

I'm grateful for the silence when Greg leaves to get a drink. To say the man was pissed over the way Hawk spoke about me is an understatement.

For me, though, I'll admit a numbness has begun to set in. My brain and body are finally on board with each other. And even in my state of numbness, I know that if I let myself feel the damage Hawk's words inflicted, I might never recover.

I gaze out the window and wonder when enough is enough. I'm only in my twenties, but I feel old and worn down. I've spent so much of my life trying to please others that I've run myself into the ground. Like a well, I gave and gave until my reserves ran dry. While I gave everything I had, there was nobody there to give me anything back.

And now, here I am, in another hospital bed in another town, trying to help someone else to the detriment of my own health.

My shoulder throbs, but I ignore it. The pain pump has been removed in favor of oral medications, but I know I'm not due for my next dose for at least another hour. I guess the pain is something I'll just have to live with.

I turn at the sound of the door opening. "Knock, knock." Ev pokes his head in and smiles at me, but it falls quickly at whatever expression he sees on my face.

"What's wrong?" he asks, walking over and taking the chair next to my bed.

"I'm just tired."

"You're a shitty liar."

I'm not, actually. I just don't have the energy to put into it right now.

"Hawk stopped by."

I see E tense. "And how'd that go? I'm guessing he was his usual joyful self."

"Oh, he was in a mood."

"What did he say?"

"It doesn't matter. None of it does. Greg made him leave." I blow out a breath as E reaches for my hand.

"Avery."

I stare out the window as my tears fall down my face, scorching a fiery path through the numbness. “I don’t understand why they hate me so much.”

“They love you. Sometimes the lines between love and hate blur so much that we confuse one emotion with the other. If they really hated you, they wouldn’t come to see you.”

“Maybe,” I whisper, wishing right now for the numbness to return.

“I’ve started doing a little digging into what we talked about, but it’s going to take time. In the meantime, I’m going to tighten up our security and make sure everyone is on guard. Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“How come you never told Hawk and Creed about your job?”

“When we first met, I was in a different department, remember? But besides that, everything I do requires my silence. I’ve signed NDAs and contracts that bind my hands and my words. And at the time, I was more than willing to do so if it meant saving just one child’s life.”

“And now?”

“Now...” I shrug, wincing in pain. “I still believe in what I do, but the department I was moved to wasn’t what I signed up for. Yes, I still save missing children, but at what cost?”

E squeezes my hand. “I understand. I’ve been on the wrong side of the government’s agendas one too many times for me to ever see them as good guys, but I’m not blind, Avery. I dig through a lot of shit in my line of work. A lot of it I don’t have the clearance to even know exists. So, I know for every shitty, duplicitous asshole out there, there is someone working tirelessly behind the scenes, trying to do the right thing.”

I nod.

“Hell, most won’t even receive any kind of recognition.”

“They don’t do it for the recognition. Well, that’s not why I do it, anyway. The second we walk into that building, every action we take, every word we speak, hell, every breath we breathe is all for the kids we desperately want to find.”

“You’re the unsung heroes.”

“We’re not heroes. We are just humans who care. And yeah, maybe that’s an anomaly these days, but it shouldn’t be. If we stop caring and stop trying to right the wrongs, we’re just animals.”

The look on his face makes me swallow.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. You just look different when you talk about this. You get so animated and passionate. After everything you’ve seen...” His voice trails off, and it’s my turn to squeeze his hand.

“I’ve seen the worst humanity has to offer,” I confirm. “But I’ve also seen the best too.”

I fill E in on as much of my job as I can and my fears for the children we’re saving. E’s eyes rove over my face as I talk, and something in his expression makes me squirm.

“We’re going to figure this out. I need to talk to Oz and Zig and explain what’s going on. And then I think you should sit down with everyone and explain it yourself, in your own words.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. Hawk and Creed want me gone. And honestly, I don’t think I can handle many more confrontations. I’ve done what I set out to do, and that’s give you all the information I had. What you do with that is up to you. We can exchange numbers, and I can help out remotely if you need anything else, but this isn’t my home anymore, E. And I have other people relying on me.”

He doesn’t look happy, but before he can say anything else, a nurse bursts into the room, growling at him.

“I know you don’t like to listen to the rules around here, but I’m afraid I must insist that you step outside so that I can help my patient get cleaned up.”

Ev looks at me.

“Go home. Talk to the guys. I have a feeling this is going to take a lot out of me, so I’m pretty sure there’s going to be a nap in my future.”

“Alright, fine.” He leans over me, but instead of kissing my forehead like he’s been doing, his lips press against the corner of my mouth, making my eyes widen in shock. He pulls back and winks at me, making me blink rapidly.

What in the heck was that all about? I open my mouth to ask him just that, but he just grins. *Don’t overthink it, Avery.*

“Are you expecting Greg back? Want me to call him?”

I swallow, trying to get my thoughts in order. “He went to the cafeteria to get a coffee and to find something edible for me to eat. Can you take him home with you? Tell him I’m okay. I just need to rest.”

“I can do that. Want me to bring anything with me when I come back? Food, clothes, books?”

My eyes must light up when he mentions books because he laughs.

“Alright, I’ll see what I can find. Take care, Avery.”

“You too, Evander.”

The nurse waits for him to close the door before the scowl melts off her face. “Sweet baby Jesus, he sure is a looker.”

I chuckle at her words, ignoring the pain in my shoulder. “Seems to be a job requirement.”

“Oh yeah? What does he do?”

“Have you heard of Apex Tactical?” They are local heroes around here, but most people are surprisingly tight-lipped about them, which says a lot about the kind of men they are to garner that kind of reaction from people.

“He’s from Apex?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that explains a lot.”

“It does?”

“Uh-huh, like every time he walks into a room, my panties seem to just... poof—disappear.”

A burst of startled laughter escapes me. Though it makes my shoulder scream in pain, it feels good to laugh—to feel something other than anger and heartbreak.

“So, how did you meet that chunk of hunk-a-liciousness?”

“He’s friends with my ex-husbands.”

“Exes, plural? This sounds better than my favorite soap opera.”

“Unfortunately, there’s no happy ending to my story.”

“Pish posh. You’re still young. You’re acting like your story is over when you’re not even halfway through. The way that boy was looking at you, I think you’ll find there is a whole lot more to come.”

“Wait, what? No, it’s not like—”

She presses her fingers to my lips and shushes me. “That man is finer than frog hair, and he’s into you. You said exes?”

When I nod, still trying to understand the frog hair comment, she continues.

“Then I don’t see there being a problem with you getting down and dirty with soldier boy.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Young people think everything is complicated. Let me tell you something. One day, you’re gonna die.”

I jolt at her words, my lips turning up into a grin at her candor.

“In that moment before, you’re dragged through those pearly gates, you’re gonna look back at your life. And what do you think you’re going to feel?”

I’ll feel a lot, some of it good. Pride for what I do and happiness for when it all works out. There is sadness, too, and, of course, regret and fear. But the overall feeling I’m left with when I look up into her pretty, knowing eyes is loneliness.

“Take it from a wise old woman: living your life for others can be utterly fulfilling. But, sugar pie, you can’t stop living for yourself either. You have to treat yourself with the same love and kindness you treat others.”

Her words strike a chord inside me. I spend a lot of time teaching little girls about knowing their worth, and yet I’m constantly undervaluing my own. Perhaps it’s a lingering effect from my childhood. Maybe that’s how I let Creed and Hawk suck me into their orbit to begin with.

I always felt like I needed to pinch myself when I was with them. Every look thrown our way had me assuming people were judging my worth and finding me lacking. What could they possibly see in someone like me? I let my insecurities pick away at my seams, so much so that when I needed the strength to confront them, I unraveled instead.

Our whole relationship had been such a whirlwind that I felt like I could barely catch my breath. As with all storms, though, when the chaos passed, everything came crashing down around us.

I haven’t looked at another man since my marriage fell apart. I needed to retreat and lick my wounds for a bit, but could my nurse be right? Does Ev like me? Like, like me, like me.

“God, I sound like a teenager.”

“What was that, dear?”

“Nothing. I was just wondering if I could wash my hair. I know I can’t do it myself, but my scalp is super itchy.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got you.”

She chats away as she helps me off the bed and watches over me as I walk to the attached bathroom, but I tune her out as I slip back into my thoughts.

I’m willing to admit, to myself at least, that E is hot. But it’s more than his looks. He seems like a genuinely nice guy, and I’m all too aware of how unusual that is. Not that I’m a man-hater—well, not all men anyway. It’s just hard living the life I do without feeling disappointed in the opposite sex all

the damn time.

My nurse starts to hum as she helps me get cleaned up, and I moan in pleasure as she washes my hair, earning a chuckle from her. She's quiet after that, and I get the feeling she knows her words have sparked a flame inside me.

Evander and I are a no-go, that much I do know. As captivating as the man is, I don't see us having anything more than what we have. His friendship with Hawk and Creed will always stand between us. Hell, they're not even my exes. They're still my husbands, even if only one of them was legally so. It doesn't change the fact that I need to move on. Not just physically and mentally, but officially too.

It's time I got a divorce.

Something settles in me at that thought. It's hot and heavy and not comforting like I hoped it would be. But then nobody said clarity would bring peace—only truth. And the truth is, my marriage has been over for a long time. Not because I left, but because they didn't come after me.

Chapter Six

Creed

I shove the last of the supplies into the back of the truck before climbing inside.

“They buy it?” Hawk asks as I close the door and strap myself in.

“No reason not to. Zig asked what I planned to do with Avery while she was here, and I told him, nothing. I said I’d been to see her and thanked her for saving me, but that’s the end of it. I got the feeling he wanted to say more, but he left it alone.”

“It helps that they’re still unsure about her. If they were all on Avery’s side, like Greg and E seem to be, then this might have been a lot harder to pull off.”

A pang of guilt eats at me, but I push it aside. I don’t like lying to Oz and Zig, but this shit with Avery trumps everything else.

“Anyway, I told him it was a flying visit just to check in and collect a few more supplies. He expects us to be radio silent except for our weekly check-ins, so as long as we don’t forget, we’ll be fine for a while. Oz did jump in, though, saying that Ev wanted a family meeting tonight. But I told him what we were dealing with was time-sensitive, so he’d have to fill us in later if they think it’s necessary.”

“Good. I’m not sure I wouldn’t knock the fucker out. And that asshole Greg, too.”

“For being nice to Avery?”

He growls. “It was more than being fucking nice. Forget it. I don’t want to talk about it. You sure we’ve got everything we’ll need?”

“Yeah. If not, one of us can take the truck and pick shit up. We’ll have to get food anyway.”

“Fine.”

We bribed one of the staff members at the hospital for the address on file for Avery and found out she’s been staying at one of the budget hotels on the outskirts of town. That alone pisses me off. The place is a dive and rife with trouble—mainly prostitution and the occasional drug bust. I want to shake the hell out of Avery and ask her what the fuck she was thinking, putting herself in danger like that. Does the woman not have an ounce of sense in her brain?

“Are you sure she’s getting out today?”

“Yeah. My guy said she told the doctor she had someone coming to stay with her to help her out. They just won’t be getting in until this evening, so she’s getting a cab.”

“Who the fuck is she expecting?”

“My guess? No one. She just doesn’t want to stay in the hospital any longer than necessary.”

He grunts but doesn’t say anything else until we pull up at the motel. “This place have cameras?”

“Only in reception. And as luck would have it, Avery’s room is at the end, so we can park and be in and out, and nobody will be any the wiser.”

And that’s what we do. Each room has two parking spaces out front, but almost all of them are empty. They might fill up later as guys arrive for their evening of pay-per-fucking, but we’ll be long gone by then.

We climb out and lock the car, not trusting any fucker here. As I watch Hawk jimmy the flimsy lock on Avery’s door, I’m not sure we have any room to judge right now.

The door clicks open with sickening ease, allowing me and Hawk to walk right on in. I look around the room and grimace. The seventies called and wants their decor back.

Floral wallpaper, with tangerine orange being the dominant color, adorns the walls. The carpet is a brown shag that I pray has always been brown. The bed is covered with a faded gray bedspread and a single pillow that doesn’t look any thicker than the blanket itself. The attached bathroom is avocado green, but at least it seems clean despite how dated it is. Spotting the cleaning products on the floor near the sink, I can only guess that it’s this clean thanks to Avery and not housekeeping.

“This place looks like the set of a bad porno.” Hawk grimaces as he looks around.

“It probably has been.”

“Maybe that’s why she’s back. Maybe she needs money.”

“And you think she’s doing porn?” I scoff, and he shoves me out of his way with a huff.

“Porn aside, maybe you’re right. Maybe it is about money. But somehow, I doubt it’s as simple as that. Check the fridge. See what’s in there.”

As Hawk does that, I check out the few items Avery has scattered around. A hairbrush on the bedside table, a toothbrush, and a bottle of mouthwash on

the bathroom counter with a couple of hair ties. A pair of flip-flops next to the bathroom door.

I spot the strap of a bag sticking out from under the bed and reach down to yank it out. It's a large gym bag filled with clothes and books and other girly shit. I search through it for weapons or anything else of interest but come up empty-handed.

"A bottle of water, half a bag of Twizzlers, and a yogurt that's outdated as of yesterday," Hawk calls out before looking at me.

I take the little zip-lock bag from my pocket and slip out two pills before handing them to him. "You sure this won't mess with what the doctor prescribed her?"

"No, I double-checked. These are the same ones she takes when she flies. They knock her out in minutes." Of course, he knows that already. Avery has always been terrified of planes—she hates being trapped inside, unable to choose when to get off—so she always took something to knock her out for the entire flight. I'm sure she never considered this when she showed us what medication she took.

I watch as he slips the pills into the water bottle and swirls it around until they dissolve. "And if she doesn't drink it?"

"Then we move on to plan B."

It's an unfortunate truth that in our line of work, it's too damn easy to get our hands on pretty much anything. The chloroform in my bag is proof of that. But I'd rather Avery didn't wake up in a panic to find a cloth pressed over her nose and mouth. I might be an asshole, but I don't want to be the reason to see terror in her eyes.

My cell chimes, so I pull it out and read the text that's just come through. "She just left."

"So, now what?"

"Now, we wait. Hide around the back until I give the signal."

"And you?"

I look down at the bed where the bag was stuffed and grimace.

"You're gonna hide under the bed? Seriously? When the fuck did we turn into stalkers?"

"You're fine with drugging her, but crawling under the bed is where you draw the line? You're fucked-up. You know that, right?"

"I think, at this point, you shouldn't be one to judge."

"I just need to keep an eye on her to see if she drinks the water. Be

grateful you're bulkier than me, or I'd make you slide your ass under there. I'm going to need to marinate in bleach after this."

Hawk smirks before changing the subject back to what we were talking about earlier. "I can't believe she blew through that money already."

"You don't know she did," I point out. "Her coming might have nothing to do with that."

"She took just short of a million dollars from our account, Creed. You think if she had any left, she'd be staying here?"

"I don't know what the fuck to think anymore," I admit. Everything I thought I knew about the woman turned out to be a lie.

"Well, we can add it to the list of shit we want to ask her later. But for now, we better hide. Put your phone on silent and text me."

"I will when the coast is clear."

He walks out, closing the door behind him.

I silence my phone, and with a reluctant sigh, I drop to my stomach and maneuver myself under the bed. I drag the bag I'd placed on the floor back into the spot I found it and wait, anticipation running through my veins. As fucked up as it is, the adrenaline rush is what I live for. It's why being a mercenary suits me so well.

I don't know how long I lie here before the sound of a vehicle pulling up has me tensing, and I ready myself for anything. I listen to the murmured voices and hear the car drive away before the creak of the door opening has me holding my breath.

"Shit. Did I forget to lock it?" I hear Avery's confused voice as she hesitates in the doorway. It completely slipped my mind to lock the door. I never fuck up, but this woman has always taken my best-laid plans and thrown them out the window.

Her breathing picks up as she listens for anything out of the norm. A part of me is pissed she doesn't turn tail and run, even if it would fuck up our plans. I thought we'd taught her better than this.

I hear rustling and see a bag drop near her feet before she slowly walks into the room. I watch her feet as she passes the bed. Her white sneakers still have a splatter of blood across the toe, and I'm pissed. Not that it's there. I'm still trying to process all my feelings attached to what went down in the diner. No, it's the fact that she had nobody to call to bring her something clean to wear.

She checks the bathroom, and when she finds it empty, she blows out a

relieved breath. “Right. Okay, it’s all fine, Avery. Just you being your usual scatterbrained self.” She sighs before walking back to the door and closing it.

She picks up the bag she dropped and places it on the bed before dragging out the bag beside me. “Nothing missing,” she muses before she drops it back to the floor and kicks it into my face.

I turn away as I hear the fridge door open and shift a little closer to the edge of the bed so I can see her better. Sure enough, she has the water bottle in her hand. That’s when I notice her arm in a sling. Fuck. She wasn’t wearing that in the hospital. I watch as she puts the bottle down and looks through the paper bag holding her prescriptions. Finding what she’s looking for, she pulls out a pill bottle and struggles with it for a second before popping the lid. She takes a couple of pills and places them in her mouth before grabbing the water bottle and taking a sip, swallowing them down.

I say a silent *thank you* when she drinks the rest of the water before tossing the empty bottle in the trash can next to her dresser.

It’s quiet for a moment after that. I’d love to know what she’s thinking. I track her movements as she walks over to the dresser under the window and pushes it until it’s against the door.

I grit my teeth as she moves it, knowing that has to hurt like fucking hell.

“Jesus.” She blows out a shaky breath and walks back over to the bed before sitting on it.

Moments later, she speaks. “Hey.” For a second, I think she’s talking to me. She sighs. “I’m okay, I promise.”

She’s quiet for a minute before she talks again. “I know. Things haven’t gone as planned, but I’ll be back as soon as I can. Yes, sure, put them on.”

She snuffles before standing up and pacing. “Hey, I know, and I’m trying.”

She chuckles at whatever they say.

“I love you too. I promise I’ll see you soon. But I have to go now. I need to rest for a little while.”

More silence before she murmurs a goodbye and hangs up.

I hear her crying, which has me clenching my fists tightly. Does she have another man? Fucking figures. Whatever she came back for, it sure as shit wasn’t me and Hawk. Not with another motherfucker warming her bed. Not unless she’s come for a divorce.

Fuck.

Somehow, the thought hurts worse when I think about her wanting a

divorce rather than me being the one to initiate it. I don't care how much of a dick that makes me sound. She's called the shots the whole time. And while we've been living here in limbo, she's been living it up with a new guy.

Well, fuck that, and fuck her too.

She tosses the phone down with a clank, making me believe it hit the bedside table. Silently, she strips out of the borrowed scrubs she's wearing and her sneakers, letting everything drop to the floor before she walks into the bathroom and runs the water.

I lie here listening to the sounds of her cleaning herself before she walks back out and crawls into bed with a whimper. I wait for her breathing to even out before I roll out from under the bed and slowly get to my feet.

I stare down at her, pissed off all over again, though the tear tracks across her cheeks make me swallow hard. I hate the way she still affects me, even after all this time. For a moment, I'd toyed with her being mine again. Her coming here had to mean something, but I should have known better.

I pull out my cell phone and text Hawk that the coast is clear before carefully pushing the dresser away from the door. He opens it a few minutes later, his eyes going to Avery's sleeping form.

"Pack everything of hers so we can take it with us. The water bottle from the trash too. If, for some reason, someone comes looking for her, I don't want to leave anything that might make them think she did anything other than leave of her own free will."

"On it."

I walk around the bed and snag the cell phone from the bedside table. It's a flip phone. Nothing special, so I'm not surprised when I open it and find next to no contacts inside it.

The ones I do find make me growl.

Seems Hawk might have a point about Greg and Ev. Their numbers, besides the diner's, are the only ones in the contacts list. The last number she called has been deleted, making me curse. If I could give it to Ev, I would. But right now, that's not an option.

Instead, I pop the back off the phone, remove the SIM card, and flush it down the toilet. I leave the phone on the bedside table, hoping it will look as if she left it on purpose so she can't be traced. With that done, I pull back the covers and freeze when I see she's not wearing anything other than a pair of pale blue panties, not even her sling.

"Fuck," Hawk curses from behind me.

I yank the bag out from under the bed and grab the first thing I find inside it, which, thankfully, is a large T-shirt. “Help me get this on her.”

Hawk moves around me and bends down, sliding his arm behind Avery, mindful of her injury, and lifts her into a sitting position.

My eyes fall on her breasts. Her nipples are hard in the cool air, making me want to bend down and suck one into my mouth, but I know now is not the time or place. I slip the T-shirt over her head, and Hawk helps me slide it down her body, hiding her nakedness from us once more.

My lips twitch when I see what’s written on the front.

“What?”

He looks down and snorts before shaking his head at the writing that says, *Eat a bag of dicks.*

“We need to get a move on in case Ev or Greg come looking for her.”

“I’ve got her. You grab the bag and her clothes,” Hawk says as he carefully sweeps Avery up into his arms and holds her against his chest. “Do a walk-through to make sure I got everything. I’ll meet you at the truck.”

He keeps his head down as if he’s talking to her as he walks out.

I make the bed, knowing it’s something Avery would do before checking out, and then do a sweep of the bathroom and bedroom to make sure we have everything. I notice the bag she brought home from the hospital on the bed and grab it, finding the room key inside, along with her dirty clothes and a chain. I reach in and pull out the chain, my jaw dropping when I see the familiar rings hanging from it. Two rings. Wedding bands. The ones that Hawk and I gave her on our wedding day.

I drop them back in the bag as if they burned me, unsure what to make of them. I shove the dirty clothes from the floor into the bag before shoving it inside the larger gym bag and tossing it over my shoulder. I push the dresser back into its proper place and take one last look at the room before walking out to the truck.

I pull my ball cap low as I toss the bag in the back before climbing into the front seat, my eyes on Avery in the middle with her head rolled to the side. I strap myself in and tug her until she is resting her head on my shoulder.

“You good?”

“Yeah. There’s a drop box near the exit for keys. I need to toss this one in so it doesn’t raise any red flags.”

“You think anyone’s really gonna look that hard?”

I shrug. "I'd rather be safe than sorry."

As he reaches the exit, I roll the window down and toss the key into the drop box before nodding at Hawk. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

I tuck Avery under my chin and breathe her in. I can smell the faint traces of the hospital still on her skin and even a hint of blood, but beneath that is the sweet, natural scent I've always loved.

Now, though, knowing it's someone else's favorite smell, I grind my teeth and hope we can hurry up and get this shit over with before it blows our lives apart.

Chapter Seven

Avery

I wake with a groan. I feel like ass, and not even the good kind that's been to the gym and is all toned and shit. No, I feel like hot, sweaty, haven't washed in days, post-festival ass.

I roll over and bite back a curse when my shoulder protests. Oh, yeah. That's right. I was shot, and everyone hates me. Welcome to episode fifty-seven of my wonderful life.

Opening my eyes, I wince at the sunlight flooding the room. I must have forgotten to close the blinds last night. Wait, I mean this morning. I shake my head, confused, feeling like I've slept far longer than just a few hours, but I couldn't have if it's still light outside.

I consider closing my eyes and sleeping the day away, but that's not going to happen without drugs. I never thought I'd miss the good stuff they gave me at the hospital, but the shit they have me on now wears off way before I can take another dose.

With a sigh, I look at the ceiling. A ceiling made of exposed wooden beams, not the nicotine-stained popcorn ceiling in my motel room.

"What the hell?"

It takes my brain a few moments to realize what I'm seeing, but when it does, I freeze. *That's not my ceiling. This is not my motel.*

I gingerly manage to get myself into a sitting position and look out the window of the unfamiliar room and see nothing but blue sky. Sweat coats my body, and not all of it is from the bizarre heatwave baking me alive.

Slowly, I swing my legs over the side of the bed and get to my feet, taking in my body first. The T-shirt I'm wearing is my own. After tugging the material up and gazing down, I can confirm that so are the panties. They are the ones I wore home from the hospital. I hurt like a motherfucker, but not in any places that makes me feel like I've been violated. I might be naïve, but I have to believe I'd know if something was done to me while I was asleep. I'd feel it, right? I'd sure as hell wake up.

Except I didn't wake up when someone came into my hotel room and stole me out of bed.

Vomit rushes up the back of my throat as I stumble to the closest door,

which is, thankfully, a small bathroom. I drop to my knees in front of the toilet and puke up what little I have in my stomach. When there's nothing left inside me, I flush the toilet before climbing to my feet, my legs shaking as if I'd run a marathon.

Spotting my toothbrush and toothpaste on the sink, I brush my teeth and try to convince myself that this is all just a mistake. The meds must have knocked me out. Obviously, someone is here with me, and they changed me because I got sick, right? Maybe Ev or Greg? But as I spit out my toothpaste, I'm not sure I believe that.

Taking a deep breath, I search the bathroom for a weapon, but there's nothing here. Looking down at the toothbrush in my hand, I wonder if I could do any damage stabbing someone in the eye with it.

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

I make my way out to the bedroom and look around for something better to use. But apart from the large bed in the center of the room, it's empty. Somehow, I don't think instigating a pillow fight would be a good idea.

"Fuck," I hiss as I head to the door. It's not a huge room, but it seems to take me forever to reach it. When my hand touches the knob, I hesitate, wondering if it's better to stay where I am and delay whatever is going to come.

Biting my lip, I find what little courage I can and turn the knob, surprised when it opens. I push the door wide, cringing when it creaks. Stepping out into what looks like the living area, I look around but don't see anyone.

I hurry across the room to the kitchen I see on the far left. I search the drawers and whimper with relief when I find a set of knives. Dropping my toothbrush, I grab the biggest knife in the drawer and hold it out in front of me as I make my way to the front door.

I'm almost in touching distance when it swings open, making me freeze when I see Hawk's imposing frame filling the doorway.

He takes me in, his eyes moving from my face to the knife in my hand, before he glares at me. "Drop the knife, Avery."

I stumble back, but I don't drop the knife. "What the hell is going on?"

"Drop the knife first. I don't trust you not to stab me in the back. You're good at that, after all."

"You're crazy. You kidnapped me and—"

He's on me before I can react, his hand squeezing my wrist until I cry out and drop the knife. He yanks me to him. The pain radiating through my body

makes everything fade in and out. I don't even realize I'm crying until yelling snaps me out of my haze.

"Jesus, Hawk. She was just fucking shot."

I find myself being picked up and carried over to the sofa. As soon as my butt touches the cushion, I scramble as far away as I can from both Creed and Hawk, who are hovering over me.

"Easy, Avery. It's just me and Hawk. We won't hurt you. You know that."

"Excuse me if I find that hard to believe right now," I whisper, holding my throbbing arm close to my body.

Hawk curses and stalks off to the kitchen before returning with a glass of water and a bottle of my prescription medication. He pops the lid for me and holds it out to me as I stare at him wearily. If he had just tried to hand me pills, I wouldn't have taken them, but I feel safe knowing what they are. I take two pills from the bottle and swallow them down with the water, my eyes staying on him.

"I want to go home now, please."

"And where is home?" Creed asks, making me turn to look at him.

"Right now? Anywhere away from here."

"Typical." Hawk huffs before sitting down on the battered coffee table that creaks under his weight.

"You can leave just as soon as you've answered some questions, and we're sure you're not here to cause trouble."

Wow, I knew he was a dick, but this seems extra dickish, even for him. I guess that makes him King Dick, ruler of all dicks.

"What, no arguing?"

Shit. What was he saying? Right, they want me to answer their questions. These pills are making me more unfocused than usual. Maybe I should start taking half the dose the doctor prescribed. I don't want them to know the pills are affecting me in any way. They're trained to know when to press the advantage they're given.

"There's no point. I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't. Why don't you just tell me what you want me to say, and then we can all go back to our lives and back to ceasing to exist to each other again."

"Is that what you think, Avery? That we haven't thought about you since you ran away? It might be easy for you to forget, but it's not that easy for the rest of us."

I sit there in stunned silence, wondering if Creed might have helped himself to my pills, because I can't believe the shit coming out of his mouth.

"So that's the game we're playing, huh? You're rewriting history to fit your narrative. Why? I have nothing left to give you. You already took it all."

Hawk stands up, glaring down at me. "We're not the ones playing games. I guess some things never change. Well, the time for answers is now. If you're not willing to give them, I suggest you get comfortable because you're not going anywhere until we get them."

He storms outside, leaving me with a throbbing headache as I try to pick apart his words. But none of them make sense. It's like we're having two different conversations. What actually happened and their version of it. I don't understand what they're trying to achieve.

I'm sure as hell not about to spill my secrets to people who have taught me time and time again that all they have to offer me are pretty little lies. From now on, my lips will stay sealed, and my secrets will remain my own.

I think of Greg and Evander, E in particular, and swallow. I was so close to telling him everything, but now I'm glad I didn't because I don't know if he's part of all this. Did I fall for the classic good cop, bad cop strategy? God, I'm pathetic.

"Fuck this. We have things to do. Like Hawk said, get comfortable and think about everything you put us through. You owe us answers. It really is as simple as that. If you just tell us what we want to know, we can return you to the same shitty motel you were staying in before anyone even notices you're missing. That's if anyone notices. You never were very good at keeping friends now, were you?"

Nasty comments are usually more Hawk's style, but Creed has been known to lash out when his feelings are hurt or if he's not getting his way. I have no idea what triggered him this time, but I ignore the stab of pain his words deliver. It's not that I can't keep friends, it's that I find it hard to make them. I have trust issues. Surprising, I know. But I've always found it easier to keep people at arm's length until I know I'm safe with them. Not that my instincts have been that great lately. I trusted Creed and Hawk, and look how that turned out.

"Oh, and Avery?" Creed leans down over me, his nose skimming mine. "Don't try to run. The nearest neighbor is twenty miles away. We'd find you before you even made it a fraction of the way." He turns and stomps away, yanking the front door open before disappearing outside and slamming the

door behind him.

I look around the room, my heart thundering in my chest as it finally dawns on me. They kidnapped me, and they're keeping me here until they decide otherwise.

"No, fuck that." I climb to my feet and head over to the kitchen. I yank the knife drawer open and pause, staring at them.

"Fuck!"

I slam the drawer closed and blow out a breath, gripping the kitchen counter, willing myself to calm down before I do something stupid like try to run twenty miles for help. The truth is, now that I know who has me, a knife will be pretty useless. I might be angry, but I'd never be able to stab one of them.

"Okay, think."

I look down at my clothing, or lack thereof, and decide that's as good a place to start as any. If I do get the chance to get out of here, I'll need to be wearing more than a T-shirt. Shoes would also be good.

I know my bag isn't in my bedroom. I looked for a weapon, so I'd have spotted it if it was in there. The fact that my toothbrush and toothpaste are in the bathroom suggests they brought it with them. Besides, leaving it behind would be suspicious.

I start moving around the kitchen, opening cupboard doors—being careful not to overstretch and cause myself more pain—before closing them. They're full, mostly with canned soup and chili. Staples that last a long time. Shit, how long are they planning on keeping me here? Creed's right about me not having friends, but that doesn't mean my absence won't be noticed.

I keep looking, finding cleaning products under the sink and some plates, cups, and bowls in one of the other cupboards. But no bag.

I walk out of the kitchen and back into the living room. It's not particularly big. Large enough for a worn sofa and chair to sit on a faded rug along with the scarred wooden coffee table. Behind the sofa, in front of a grimy window, is a four-seater table and chairs that look like they've seen better days. On the far wall is a floor-to-ceiling bookcase filled with an assortment of books that at any other time would perk me up, but not today. Today, it's going to take way more than books for me to find any kind of inner peace.

Looking around, I see there is nowhere to hide a bag. Not one the size of mine, anyway. So where else could it be? Is there a second room?

I freeze in the middle of the room, my eyes flicking to the door I exited from earlier. There's only one room. Which means...

“Holy shit.” They must be planning to sleep with me. “Oh no. No, no, no, no.”

Hoping I'm wrong, I hurry to the door and gaze into the room I woke up in before. There is no hallway with an extra room or even an additional bathroom. What I see is all there is.

I swallow, pushing the panic aside for now, and move to the bed, checking underneath it for my bag, but there's nothing there. There's no dresser, no closet, not even a trunk for bedding. I run my hand through my hair in frustration.

Where the hell is everything?

I hear the sound of an engine and hurry over to the window, watching as a truck parks in a dilapidated barn.

Not stopping to think, I take off running through the house, out through the front door, and over to the barn, ignoring the fact that my feet are bare and my shoulder is throbbing. I slap my hands on the back of the truck and run toward the driver's side just as the door opens.

“Oh, thank God. You have to help me. I—”

My words die in my mouth when Hawk climbs out of the truck and crosses his arms over his chest with a smug smirk on his face.

“You were saying?”

I shake my head in confusion. This isn't the car they usually come to the diner in.

“I don't understand.”

“What's to understand? I was moving my truck out of the sun.”

And yet, it's more than that. I feel like I've somehow failed a test they set.

“Did you want something, Avery?” Creed asks from behind me, making me whirl around.

I open my mouth but close it again when I feel tears prick my eyes. He watches me, his expression never changing. I can only assume he's taking pleasure in giving me false hope before snatching it away.

Once I'm sure I have my emotions under control, I straighten my shoulders, biting back the wince of pain, and wipe my face clean of any expression. If he can do it, so can I. He has no idea who he's messing with.

“I was just looking for my bag. I'd like to take a shower.”

“Everything you need is already in your room.”

“There is nothing in there except a toothbrush and toothpaste.”

“Like I said, everything you need.”

I take a step back but refuse to show anything on my face except for cool indifference. “Very well.” I turn and walk away, ignoring Hawk as he moves behind me.

I don’t ask about clean dressings for my shoulder or if they have my sling. I refuse to let them see the tears gathering in my eyes. I walk into the house and head back to the bedroom before making a beeline for the bathroom. I close and lock the door before sliding down the wall, not caring about the pain I feel radiating from my shoulder. Only now do I let my tears fall.

I don’t make a sound. Not one whimper or snuffle to give away my distress or pain. These are not the men I once knew, so I need to stop treating them as if they were.

The crying helps release the pent-up tension threatening to explode inside me. Blowing out a breath, I slowly get to my feet and walk to the sink, looking up at my pale face in the mirror. I make a promise to myself. A promise to survive. I’ll let them bend me and twist me up in all the knots they want just to please their little dark hearts, but they will not break me. Not this time.

And when I leave, and I will, it’s just a matter of biding my time, it will be the last time I see them, unless it’s in court.

I splash cold water on my face before turning to the shower in contemplation. The heat is almost unbearable, so the thought of climbing under the cool spray is enticing, but I don’t trust Creed and Hawk not to pull another stunt while I’m in here. No, it will have to wait for now.

I spot the bottle of hand wash just behind the shower curtain and grab it. It’s the one I bought for the motel room. Rose-scented. It’s not ideal, but it will work for now.

I fill the sink and slip off my panties—I’ve had them on for far too long—and wash them using the rose-scented hand wash before wringing them out. I’d hang them over the curtail rod, but I don’t trust the guys not to take them from me out of spite. Thankfully, there’s a small window above the toilet, way too small for someone to crawl through, but big enough for what I need.

I twist the handle, happy to find it unlocked, and push it open just wide enough for me to hang the panties out before I close the window once more,

trapping the blue material. In this heat, it shouldn't take long for them to dry, which is good. There is no way I'm sleeping in that bed tonight without them, not if I'm supposed to be sharing it.

Hell, I'd rather wear them wet than go bare. Once upon a time, that would have been a different story, but now the thought of them touching me makes me want to scream. Sleeping beside them will be like playing with a double-edged sword. One wrong move and I'm in trouble. My head might want to set them on fire, but my body remembers the fires they once stoked within me. I'd had sex before them. Not much, but some. It had always been with a slight detachment. Sex with emotion? Well, turns out that is something else altogether.

Instead of seeking your own release, you become more aware of your partner's wants and needs. There's nothing better than making alpha men drop to their knees. It made me feel powerful, and it was addictive, and something I haven't had since I left. I thought about it. Even came close once, but I just couldn't bring myself to break the vows I took. It might have all been a lie to them, but I meant every word I spoke that day.

For four years, I've been celibate. Four years of using my hand and my battery-operated boyfriend, and now I'm about to share a bed with two men who could have easily been underwear models in another life. And in this heat, I fear what was once a dry spell will trigger a tsunami.

Not good.

I take some deep breaths. I'm not sure I can center myself enough right now to meditate, but I can give myself a mini pep talk.

I am a strong, resilient woman. I'm immune to their big-dick energy. I will not fall under their spell because the euphoria won't last. They will break more than my fucking dry spell if I let them.

Well, not today, Satan. Not today.

Okay, so my pep talk needs a little work, but it will do in a pinch. I nod to my reflection to let her know I've got this, ignoring the skeptical look on my face as I unlock the door and pull it open.

I jump when Hawk falls back. He must have dozed off leaning on the door. I frown down at him as he looks up at me. Nope. I don't even want to know why he's here.

I step over him, or try to, but when I have a foot on either side of his head, I find hands banded around my ankles holding me in place.

"What the hell, Hawk?"

I look down, but he isn't looking at my face. He's staring straight up at my—

“Sonofabitch. Let me go.”

He ignores me. His focus solely on my bare pussy. When he licks his lips, I swear to God, I feel my womb spasm. I take back what I said about not being able to stab them. If I had a knife handy right now, I'd stick it in his eyeball.

I feel myself slicken under his gaze. If I don't get him away from me, he'll soon see exactly the kind of effect he still has on my body.

“Let me go, Hawk, before I punch you,” I warn him. My voice wavers a little, though I don't think he notices.

Reluctantly, he releases my ankles. I waste no time hurrying away from him in case he changes his mind. I was planning on hiding out in the bedroom, but needing to put some space between me and him, I head to the living room instead. I hesitate when I find Creed in the kitchen.

“Pasta for dinner,” he tells me.

Nodding, I shuffle over to the sofa. I plop myself down on one end before tucking my knees up under my chin and tugging the long T-shirt down to cover everything.

When Hawk walks in a minute later, I look away, feeling my skin heat with embarrassment. The last thing I want is for him to think that was some kind of trick to get them to change their minds about keeping me here. There isn't much I wouldn't do to get away from them, but I can't bring myself to taint the one good thing that remains between us. After all, everything else might have been a lie, but the sex wasn't. It's impossible to fake what we shared. Using my body to manipulate them now would just cheapen it all. That might make me a sentimental fool, but I can't help who I am.

Hawk surprises me by sitting down on the sofa next to me, his hand landing on my knee. I snap my head around to focus on him. His eyes lock on mine, and for a second, I forget how to breathe. When he moves, I dive off the sofa and head to the kitchen before he can do something stupid like kiss me.

“Do you need any help?” I ask Creed, who looks at me in surprise before nodding to the stuff for a salad on the counter.

“You can make the salad if you like.”

I nod, and he watches as I move around the counter. When I'm standing next to the vegetables, I look at Creed expectantly.

“What?”

“I need a knife.”

“Third drawer down, but then you already know that, don’t you?” he mocks.

My shoulders drop in defeat before I remember that I don’t have anything to feel bad for. Deciding I’d rather go hungry than have to choke on the humble pie these assholes are intent on feeding me, I walk away.

Chapter Eight

Evander

I look around the table at the serious faces staring back at me and sigh. “Look, I get that there’s history between you all, but I believe her.”

“You don’t know her,” Oz points out.

“Exactly. I don’t have an opinion already formed about the woman based on the fact that she hurt your friends’ feelings.”

“She was our friend too until she bailed,” Zig states, leaning back.

“Ev might not know Avery, but I do. And that woman I saw laying in that hospital yesterday is the same girl Creed and Hawk brought home all those years ago. For what it’s worth, I believe her too,” Greg agrees.

“Alright. I don’t want another repeat of how we fucked up with Astrid. Run over everything again, Ev, and we’ll look at it from a neutral standpoint.”

I blow out a breath and nod. I pick up the clicker, which makes the large image on the screen change back to the first shot. “Avery works within a department of the government that has contacts in various alphabet agencies, predominantly DHS, ICE, and the FBI. Now we know these assholes hate sharing, but in this area, it seems they have found a common cause. Sex trafficking, in particular, was what Avery’s department largely focused on.”

“How come Hawk and Creed never told us this before? We’ve probably crossed paths with some of these cases,” Slade asks.

“Honestly, I got the impression they didn’t ask. Avery did say she had signed an NDA and didn’t have the clearance to share, but from what she said, they never pushed for more information either.”

“So, what the hell did they think she did?”

“Hawk told me that he thought she was a social worker or teacher.”

“They assumed but never asked. Not that there is anything wrong with either profession, but their guesses still make them sound like sexist dicks,” Crew huffs. “What were they thinking?”

“I won’t know their take on it until I talk to them.” I rub my eyes.

“Well, that will have to wait for a while. They headed out this morning to finish up the Duggan case. Won’t be back for a month,” Zig warns me.

“They have any issues?” Wilder asks, but Oz shakes his head.

“None so far. It’s just a slow process. Not all bad guys like to launch into a monologue about the crimes they’ve committed. Sometimes confessions take a little finesse.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Jagger chuckles.

“Back to Avery. If she signed an NDA preventing her from talking, how come she’s willing to spill the beans now? These guys won’t go easier on her just because she’s a woman. Fuck, now I sound like a sexist asshole,” Slade curses, making me laugh.

“Little bit. But don’t worry, I won’t tell Astrid.”

“You tell her anything, and I’ll tell her you don’t have time to help her develop her latest game.”

I drop the clicker on the table and turn to glare at him. “That’s cruel, dude.”

I ignore the laughter around me, scooping the clicker back up and flicking to the next screen. “In answer to your question about what changed, it wasn’t Avery, it was the search parameters.”

“Explain.” Crew folds his arms.

“When Avery left here and returned, they offered her her job back, but in a different department. Here, instead of simply searching for children that have been kidnapped and trafficked, they are looking for children who are gifted.”

My words drop like a bomb, and the room descends into chaos.

Greg whistles with his fingers, the noise catching everyone’s attention. “Shut the hell up and let the man finish, for fuck’s sake.”

Everyone takes their seats, but the room is now far more charged with anger and hostility.

“Did she tell the people she works with about Salem and Astrid?” Oz asks through clenched teeth.

I shake my head. “Anything she knows about them, she got from their side, not ours.”

“But she does know about them. Fuck. I mean, of course they know. But to send Avery here, that’s a low blow.” Zig shakes his head.

“No, Zig, you’ve got it wrong. Avery didn’t come here for them. She came here for us. If they knew she was here...” I let my voice drift off and let them imagine what would happen if they found out they had a whistleblower in their midst.

“How can we be sure?” Slade snaps.

I glare at him. "I can't, but my gut's telling me she's telling the truth."

"Give us the rest," Greg urges.

"The children they find are not being returned to their homes. They're being placed in foster facilities or group homes for their 'safety.' They're spinning it as a matter of national security. Avery doesn't have the clearance, but she doesn't believe it, and she does not like what she sees."

"Yet she still works there," Jagger states quietly.

"You think they'd let her just walk away?"

Nobody says anything because they know it's true. She would need to be silenced. Knowing who these guys are, I don't doubt it would be in a permanent way.

"Fuck!" Oz curses, running his fingers through his hair. "Much as I don't like it, we need to bring her in. She'll be safer here than she will be out there on her own. We've been training for this. If it's a trap, then we'll deal with it. But if something happens to her, despite what Hawk and Creed say now, I know it will kill them."

"I'll talk to her, but I doubt she'll agree."

"Be persuasive, E." Crew snorts.

I flip him off.

"What are they doing with the kids?" Slade's question makes everyone else quiet down once more.

"On the surface, they are helping them nurture and grow their gifts. For many of the kids, they have increased due to trauma or taken on a dual nature to the gift they were born with."

Zig and Oz look at each other before Zig coughs. "It worries me that Avery has contact with these kids at all." He hastens to add, "Not because of what they might do to her, but because of what it means for her when they don't need her anymore."

"She was probably chosen for this job because of her circumstances. She had no family, no friends, and no connections at all until she met Creed and Hawk."

"Nobody will report her missing if she disappears. Nobody will mourn her once she's gone," Jagger growls.

"Exactly. Look, I'm sure there's more, but a nurse interrupted us. What she did tell me is that she came here to warn us." I hold my hand up before they erupt once more. "We need to watch Salem, now more than ever. They may be sending someone after her again."

“What the fuck does that mean?” Oz jumps up. “Did Avery tell you someone was coming, or is she the threat?”

“Calm down. If she were the threat, she wouldn’t have warned me about it. She doesn’t even know if Salem is the target. That’s just what we deduced from a vision she was told about.”

“They have a psychic. She does what Astrid does?” Oz’s face pales.

“No, it’s not the same. Avery says she sees more than just death. They call her a pre-cog.”

“And this pre-cog told Avery something would happen to Salem’s baby?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Well, unfucking complicate it, Evander. What did this fucking woman see?” Zig snaps.

I blow out a breath, searching for patience but coming up empty. “She’s not a woman, and she doesn’t understand most of what she sees because she’s a six-year-old girl, Zig. Six! And she’s being kept and trained to perform like a fucking monkey!”

Zig’s eyes close in defeat.

And I take a moment to calm down before I continue.

“The girl saw two boys with the same face looking sad.” I look between Oz and Zig so that they understand the reference.

“When Avery pushed her, the girl told her they were sad because the man hurt the baby in her tummy. She couldn’t get a description of the woman from the girl, so she has no clue if it’s Salem or not.”

“But it’s easy to deduce because she’s the only one pregnant.” Greg sighs.

“How did that lead Avery here, though?” Jagger frowns.

“Because the girl said it happens at the house called Apex, and Avery doesn’t believe in coincidences.”

“We need to talk to Avery. Find out everything she knows.”

Greg looks at me. “I’ll come to the hospital with you. Between the two of us, I think we can convince her to come, especially with Creed and Hawk being gone for the next few weeks.”

“Shouldn’t we call them and let them know what’s going on?” Wilder, who has been pretty quiet up until now, asks.

I look at Zig, who is staring at Greg, who shakes his head.

“Hawk was brutal with her, Zig. If he were here, no way would Avery agree to come.”

Slade whistles. “Fuck, Zig, you can’t not tell them. They’ll lose their fucking minds if they find out after the fact.”

“Maybe. But they haven’t really given me much choice now, have they? Besides, this is not about them anymore. It’s about Salem and Astrid and a bunch of fucking kids who have already been through enough. Avery might have come to warn us about an attack on Salem, but the way she’s been talking to Ev, it sounds like she needs help. We can’t turn our backs on these kids any more than she can. Avery has risked her life by coming here and telling us all this. Hell, she already took a bullet for Creed.”

“We should get Avery here first. That’s our top priority. Everything else can wait for now.” Greg stands.

“Agreed.” I get to my feet and toss the clicker on the table.

“Just... She’s been through a lot. She didn’t have to come here. She doesn’t owe any of us anything, but she came anyway. Try to remember that.”

“We’re not complete assholes, E.” Slade scowls. Everyone turns to look at him, making him sigh. “Fine. I’m mostly an asshole, but I think we’ve learned our lesson with Astrid. I’d like to hear both sides of the story before I blame someone for something.”

Well, that’s something, I guess. Though, something tells me that Avery’s version of events will be wildly different than Hawk and Creed’s version. And the truth... Well, that might lie somewhere in the middle.

* * *

“She’s going to be dead set against this, but I think we’ll win her over with the promise of trying to help these kids,” Greg says as he climbs in the driver’s seat.

“That’s what I was thinking too,” I agree from the passenger seat.

Greg starts the car and pulls out of the garage.

“Having Hawk and Creed away right now might just be for the best. Their lashing out is causing more harm than good.”

“You don’t need to convince me of that. I was there when Hawk tore strips off Avery. I was ready to knock the fucker out myself. I was so fucking angry on Avery’s behalf that it wasn’t until Hawk had left and I’d calmed down a little that I realized underneath all his rage, there was a whole hell of

a lot of hurt.”

“I know, and I get it. But being hurt doesn’t give him permission to be a dick. If we all acted like that, the world would be in chaos. He’s a grown-ass man. He needs to do better.”

Greg turns to look at me briefly as we pass under the Apex sign. “You’re awfully protective of someone you just met,” he says carefully, but something in his tone rubs me the wrong way.

“Look—”

“Don’t,” he says softly. “Don’t go there. She is not your girl. She can never be your girl.”

“Why? Because she was once theirs?” I snap.

“Yes. That’s exactly why. She’s off limits to you, Ev.” He barks out a laugh. “Hell, Ev, she’s still fucking married to them. You want to be that guy, really?”

“If by that guy, you mean the one to see Avery for who she really is? The one who hears what she has to say? Who speaks to her with fucking respect? Then yeah, Greg, I want to be that fucking guy. You think I should stand back because she has a history with my brothers. But that’s all it is: history. It’s in the past. I could give her a future. I could keep her safe. Make her happy. She’d be—”

“Theirs,” he tells me gently. “No matter what you do, a part of her will always be theirs.”

I turn and look out the side window, ignoring the scorch of pain his words leave behind. He’s not telling me anything I don’t already know. Hell, what the fuck would Avery even want with someone like me anyway? I might not look like I did back in high school, but inside, I’m still the geeky computer nerd who plays video games and reads comics for fun.

Still, the more Greg pushed, the harder I felt the need to push back. I can’t say I’ve ever felt the need to fight for something quite vehemently before. I’m usually the chill one. The guys joke that I’m so laid-back, I’m almost horizontal. At least until I have a lead on something. Then I’m like a dog with a bone. I don’t stop—can’t stop—until I have all the information in front of me. Then it’s just a case of rearranging it like jigsaw pieces to all fit together.

That’s where I get my thrill, not like the others who are all adrenaline junkies.

I picture Hawk and Creed and know Avery has a type. And clearly, it’s

not me. Still, I don't open my mouth to retract my statement because part of me is not willing to admit defeat. Not yet, anyway.

Once we get to the hospital, I jump out, leaving Greg to park. I make my way up to Avery's room and knock on the door before entering. There is an old guy asleep in her bed. I close the door and look at the number outside again and frown.

Heading for the nurses' station, I spot a familiar one who offers me a wide grin. "Well, hey there, sugar. What can I do for you?"

"Can you tell me what room Avery was moved to?"

She shakes her head, her smile falling a little. "She was discharged this morning. She didn't tell you?"

"No. She didn't. Do you know where she went?"

"Uh, back to her motel room, I think she said. Yeah, that's right. She told the doctor she had a family member flying in to help her out, but they weren't coming in until tonight, so she had to take an Uber."

"You know what motel?"

"No, and even if I did, I couldn't tell you. You know that."

"Right, thanks."

I turn and jog toward the elevator as the door opens, and Greg steps out. When he sees me approaching, he holds the doors and steps back inside.

"What's going on?"

"Avery checked out this morning. Took an Uber back to her motel," I tell him as I pull out my phone and start doing what I do best—hack.

"Fucking hell. It's going to be like finding a needle in a haystack because there is no way she'll have used her real—"

"Found her. She's staying at the Eastgate Motel out on the outskirts of town."

"She used her real name?" he states in shock.

"Her married name. Avery Michaels-Creed. She did tell me that she had kept her marriage a secret at work, so she never changed her last name there. Avery is not that uncommon of a name. It's ranked the twenty-sixth most popular girl's name in the US, down from last year's nineteenth. And seventh most gender—"

Greg looks at me with wide eyes.

"Right, sorry. My point is, by using her real name, she actually gave herself a little bit of anonymity. Since she isn't using the surname her company has on file, she won't ping in the system if they have parameters set

to flag her movements.”

“So, hiding in plain sight.”

“Basically. And if her employers did find her, she could say she was here visiting friends since she called this place home for a while. She could even say she came to serve divorce papers, and since they didn’t know she was married, she didn’t feel the need to tell them she was getting divorced either.”

“Huh, smart.”

“She is. But I’m not sure if she even sees it.”

“Women rarely do, which is just as well. If they did, they’d realize they have no use for our sorry asses.”

I chuckle as the elevator opens, and we head back to the car, Greg leading the way. We don’t talk on the way over to the motel. Our moods darken when we get closer and see the hookers out in full force already.

“Well, if I wasn’t already dead set on her coming with us before, I sure as shit am now.”

“You and me both. Seems smart women can make dumb decisions too,” Greg grunts.

“Well, she married Hawk and Creed, didn’t she?” I reply, making him sigh.

“Don’t suppose you found out what room she’s staying in, did ya?”

I look at him.

“Of course you did.”

Greg parks in the first spot he sees, and we both climb out and walk over to the room I know to be hers. I knock on the door. When nobody answers, I knock a little louder. Still nothing.

Greg shoves me aside. “Fuck it. If she gets pissed, I’m blaming you.”

I look at him and frown, then watch as he squats down and pulls his knife from his pocket, ready to jimmy the lock. He pauses, though, running his fingers over the scratches already there.

“Looks like someone might have beat us to it.”

“Are you armed?”

“No. You?”

“No. I didn’t fucking think we’d need it for the hospital.”

He blows out a breath. “I’ve got a piece in the truck. Hold on.”

He gets up and jogs back to the truck, grabs his gun, and heads back. He nods to me, and I take a step to the side before he unlocks the door and opens it. He steps inside, and I wait while he secures the room. Moments later, he

shouts that it's all clear. I enter and take in the scene, noting the frown on Greg's face.

"She didn't come back?"

I look around, checking under the bed, before spotting the cell phone on the bedside table. I pick it up and turn it over. I pop the back off and see that the SIM is gone.

"That her cell?"

I open the phone and check the contacts, but there aren't any.

"Looks like a burner, and the SIM card has been removed."

The bed is made, the room is tidy, and not a single thing is out of place except the phone.

"You think she ran?"

I turn the phone over in my hand before squeezing it tight. "If she did, why leave the phone?"

"Well, if it's a burner, it can't be traced. So why would it matter?"

"Look how tidy the room is. If she ran and didn't want us to trace her, then why not toss the phone in the trash or take it with her and dump it somewhere? Leaving it here like this feels more like a statement."

"Like she is confident we won't find her?"

I shake my head. "That's not the Avery I know. And I realize I don't know her well, but none of this fits the woman I met in the hospital."

Greg doesn't say anything else as he moves around the room. He opens the fridge, closes it, and checks the trash. Lifting the basket, he pulls out a torn piece of what looks like a paper bag.

"That green swirl is part of the hospital logo."

"Well, this answers whether she returned or not. This must be part of the bag that would have had her meds in it."

"So, she came back here, packed her stuff, tidied her room, and left, even though she went to all this trouble to come here to warn us about the shit going down? I'm not buying it. The only reason she would have run like that was if she was scared."

"The door has definitely been jimmied at some point. In this place, that means nothing. Those marks could be months or hours old. But what if Avery did leave, just not of her own accord? I agree that the cell phone is a little too conveniently placed. My first instinct is to assume she left, but you're right. That just doesn't fit."

"And making the bed? With her shoulder being the way it is... It's just

not worth it. She won't get billed extra for leaving her bed unmade, so why bother?"

"Someone forced her to leave."

"No signs of a struggle, though. So either she complied with them or..."

"She was unconscious when they took her, and they staged the room to look like she checked out."

"Fuck. I'll call the police."

"No, wait. If we call the police, Avery will definitely end up getting flagged in the system. If the people she works for haven't found her yet, they will the second we call this in. And we don't know for sure it was them that took her yet."

"It's a risk we need to take, Ev. We need this room dusted for prints and access to any video footage."

"I can hack into the video feed. That's not an issue. And I have a guy that can dust for prints for us. It might take a little longer to get the results back, but it will be safer this way."

"Unless she's getting fucking tortured," he snaps, making my hands fist.

"If they wanted her dead, we would've walked into a bloodbath. They didn't need to move her to kill her. This place would have offered them the anonymity they'd love. And given the people that are in and out of here, the suspect list would be endless."

"I hope you're fucking right, Ev." He pulls out his cell phone before looking at me. "I'll give the guys a heads-up. You call your contact and get him to come down here. I'm going to see if anyone around here saw anything."

"Check to see if anyone in reception remembers her leaving and if she left alone." It's a long shot, but worth a try.

He nods, holds the phone to his ear, and heads out.

I pull out my own phone and dial a number I know by heart.

"Yeah," the rough voice answers.

"Paul, it's Evander. I need a favor."

"Of course you do. You can never just call to shoot the shit, can you? What do you need?"

"I need a room dusted for prints. I can't call the cops on this one because I need to keep the possible victim a secret for now."

"Shit, Ev. Do I even want to know what you're dragging me into?"

"Probably not, but I can't call anyone else."

He mutters a curse before a soft feminine voice in the background murmurs something.

“Fine. Where are you?”

I reel off the motel’s address.

“Are you serious? Do you have any idea how many prints I’m likely to find in that place?”

“I’m not asking for a miracle. I just want you to run what you find and let me know what pops up.”

“You fucking owe me for this, Ev.”

“I know. Whatever you need, Paul.”

“I’ll remember you said that. Give me twenty minutes, and I’ll be there.”

He hangs up, and I use my phone to hack into the motel’s cameras. Or should I say camera. There is only one at the main entrance over the doors.

I run my hands over my face, my chest feeling tight. My need to get my hands on my laptop grows until I’m forced to call Crew.

He answers on the second ring. “Greg called. I’m already on it, brother. Tell me exactly what you need.”

“Can you bring me my laptop and charge?”

“You got it. So, what’s your gut telling you?”

“Honestly, Crew, I have no idea. All I know is that she didn’t leave this room by choice. Someone made her leave, and I want to fucking know why.”

“We’ll find her.”

“We better. Not only because she has so much more she needs to tell us, but because I care what happens to her. And here I am waiting around with my thumb up my ass.”

“Okay, calm down. I know you want to fix this, but you can’t do everything, Ev. I’ll bring you the laptop, and you can search for a trail. The rest of us will do the footwork. When we find something, we’ll let you know.”

I nod, even though he can’t see me. “Okay, and thanks, Crew.”

“No worries.”

He hangs up as I pace the room, trying to pull all the pieces together. So, Avery ran from her job to come and warn us after one of the kids she works with had a vision. But she scoped us out first. I can’t blame her for being cautious, not after the way shit went down with Astrid. Seems we have a habit of reacting without thinking through the consequences. The shooting at the diner forced her hand.

Right, the shooting.

I dial Paul again and keep pacing.

“It hasn’t been twenty minutes, you impatient asshole.”

“I need you to run a couple of names for me.”

“I’m literally driving, Ev. Think I can get to you first before I do something else for you that might get me kicked off the force?”

“I guess,” I grumble before hanging up. If my laptop were here, I’d just check it myself.

Alright, what came after the shooting? The hospital. Avery was checked in under her married name, which would mean she hasn’t updated her ID since she left, which seems unlikely. Unless they couldn’t find any and one of her ex-husbands checked her in.

I call Hawk, whose cell phone is unreachable. Same with Creed’s. Fuck. They had to have this stupid case in the middle of buttfuck nowhere, didn’t they?

I’m assuming they checked her in under her married name, and she updated them with the motel address when she woke. They must have, because when I hacked the hospital computer system, it was the only address on file. If that’s the case, I can’t see how someone would have found out where she was so quickly. Unless she was actively being followed or she made a call that was somehow traced.

I look at the burner phone and shake my head. Unlikely. There’s a reason people use burners, and that’s that they’re untraceable. I sit on the edge of the bed and tap my foot. Think, Evander. Who knew she was here, apart from me? Apart from the hospital staff, that is.

I pause. Maybe it’s not Avery that was hacked, but me. No, I’m too careful. I’d know if someone was in my system. Especially after all the upgrades I made after Cooper betrayed us all.

I’m so lost in thought, I jump when a fist bangs on the door before swinging wide open to reveal Crew with my laptop bag in his hand.

“Special delivery.”

I dive off the bed and grab it, making him laugh. I ignore him as I shove him outside, closing the door behind me. I lead us to the truck and nod for him to get in.

“Me and Greg have already been inside. I don’t want anyone else contaminating the crime scene.”

“You’re sure it’s a crime scene?”

I look over at him. “There’s nothing in that room that seems overly suspicious.”

“And yet?”

“My gut is screaming at me that something is very, very wrong.”

“Fuck. How’d I know you were going to say that?”

Chapter Nine

Avery

After a while, the heat becomes so unbearable in the bedroom that I give in and risk taking a shower. I'm beyond caring if they walk in on me at this point. The water is freezing and feels like heaven on my skin, so I stay under the spray far longer than I planned, letting the water ease the tension inside me and soothe my headache.

Removing the gauze covering my shoulder, I let the water wash over the wound. I try to remember if I am even allowed to get it wet, but that conversation took place after I was given my pain meds, and everything is a little hazy.

With a sigh, I turn the water off and climb out, grabbing the small towel from the rail and using it to pat myself dry. I slip the T-shirt back on, even though I'd rather have something clean. Beggars can't be choosers, and this beggar refuses to walk around naked with those two assholes out there acting as unpredictable as ever. I retrieve my panties from the window, happy to find them dry. I slip them on, then use the towel to dry my hair. Once most of the moisture is gone, I finger-comb it as best as I can before braiding it to keep it out of my face.

Pulling the door open, I walk back into the bedroom and stop when I see Hawk and Creed in the room pulling off their clothes. I'm tempted to go lock myself back in the bathroom, but with the door as flimsy as it is, I have no doubt they'd knock it down in seconds if they wanted to.

"You finished?" Hawk asks, stepping closer.

I move aside and nod before heading toward the door, but an arm around my waist stops me from going any farther. I grit my teeth but resist the urge to fight, at least until I know what he wants.

"Figure it's time for us to settle in for the night." His voice is low and rumbles over my skin, making my traitorous nipples pebble. I cross my arms over my chest and ignore them.

"Can I get my meds and something to eat?"

He sighs and dips his head, breathing me in before he steps away.

"I'll go with her. Take your shower," Creed tells him.

He must nod because, a moment later, the bathroom door closes, leaving

me and Creed alone.

“Come on, I made plenty of food earlier. I’ll heat some up for you.” He holds his hand out to me, but I keep my arms folded. He scowls but doesn’t force the issue. Instead, he stomps out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, yanking open the fridge and grabbing a container of leftovers. Moving around the kitchen, he takes a bowl from one of the cupboards and transfers some of the pasta into it before shoving it in the microwave.

I walk over to the counter and wait for the microwave to beep. Creed grabs the bowl and places it in front of me before pulling a fork from the drawer and holding it out for me.

“Thanks,” I mumble quietly, cursing myself and my ingrained manners.

“You want to sit?” He points to the table, but I just scoop up a piece of pasta and shove it into my mouth.

“I’m fine here.” This way, he can’t sit beside me. I don’t even care if I’m being childish. I don’t want to be here with these men who seem to hate me one minute, but the next, their hands are on me like they have a right to touch me. They gave up that right a long time ago.

“It doesn’t have to be this hard, Avery,” he says, placing my pills and a glass of water down beside my food.

“Doesn’t it? Let me guess: all I have to do is everything you say, and everything will be fine. Sounds familiar.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Let me just eat, and we can go back to ignoring each other.”

“That’s what you want? To just pretend we don’t exist?”

“It’s been working for me so far,” I snap back, stabbing another piece of pasta before chewing it angrily. I eat quickly, though it tastes like sawdust. But I know I need to keep my strength up so that I can heal faster.

Placing the half-eaten bowl on the counter, I take my pills and a drink of water as I watch him move in closer.

“Yeah, Avery. It worked so well that here you are, right back where you started.” He pushes me against the counter. He licks his lips as his hand trails up my thigh, under my T-shirt, to my hip. “We’ve done this dance a million times, and it always starts with you in a T-shirt and panties and ends with you wearing nothing but my cum.”

I shove against his chest, but he doesn’t move so much as an inch.

His hands move to cover mine, his thumbs stroking over the backs of them as he stares into my eyes, looking for answers I’m not sure he deserves.

“What happened to us, Avery? Where did it all go wrong?”

“It didn’t go wrong, Creed. It was never right to begin with. I fell in love with your lies. I could have lived out the rest of my days sipping on the deceit you fed me, but the truth was something I couldn’t live with. I traded your sweet lies for the bitter truth and decided I was worth more than what you were offering me.”

“We were never a lie,” he growls.

Lie

Tears prick my eyes, and my skin crawls. “That’s just not true,” I whisper before closing my eyes and dropping my head. He might not let me go, but that doesn’t mean I can’t shut him out.

Finally, he releases me and takes a step back. I feel his eyes on me, but I don’t look up. I simply turn and grab my food, walking it over to the sofa where I sit in the corner and tuck my legs up under me. I eat the rest of my food in silence, my stomach threatening to revolt at any minute. Somehow, I manage to choke it down.

By the time I’m done, Creed is trading places with Hawk. As the man in question walks toward me, I jump up with my empty bowl and take it to the kitchen. I wash it and place it on the drying rack before Hawk’s arms cage me in.

What is it with these two?

“What’s going on between you and Creed?”

I snort out a huff of laughter. “Not a damn thing is going on with him and me. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m tired.”

“Good. I think we’ll all feel a little better after a good night’s sleep.”

Shit, I forgot about the bed-sharing thing. Seems like my brain can only handle one thing at a time.

“I’ll take the sofa.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no? I didn’t ask.”

“The answer is still no.”

“I’m a grown-ass woman—”

“Who’s acting like a spoiled brat. You want to fight me? Go for it, and I’ll put you over my knee.”

I feel my mouth drop open and my eyes widen so much that I’m worried my eyeballs might pop out of my head and roll away. “You kidnapped me!” I screech.

He shrugs. “Get over it.”

“Get over it? Get over it?! I have never wanted to strangle someone more than I do you right now.”

He grins at me like a fucking psychopath. “Sounds kinky.”

“Eat shit and die,” I hiss before stomping to the bedroom, hating the fact that I most likely resemble an angry toddler right now, feeding right into his words about me acting like a child. What he doesn’t seem to realize is that it’s either anger or tears, and I don’t think any of us are equipped to deal with the fallout of my broken heart right now.

With gritted teeth, I climb onto the bed and lie as close to the edge as I can get without falling off. I ignore Hawk as he moves around the room, tensing only when he climbs onto the bed behind me. Just then, the bathroom door opens, and Creed walks out wearing nothing but a towel around his waist, and I can’t help but stare at all his stupid muscles. Hawk takes advantage of my distracted state to reach across the bed and yank me toward him. Before I can escape his hold, Creed climbs on the bed, sandwiching me in between them.

My heart is thundering in my chest, making me wonder if I might have a heart attack. With the strain I’ve put the thing through lately, it wouldn’t surprise me.

“Relax, Avery. We’re just sleeping. We’re not the monsters you seem to think we are,” Hawk growls in my ear. His words might be more convincing if I couldn’t feel the hard length of his cock through his boxers pressed against my ass.

“I never said you were monsters. But excuse me if I’m wary when I’ve been kidnapped by two people who hate me.”

“We don’t hate you, Avery,” Creed murmurs, rolling into me.

My skin vibrates as a tear slips from my eye and spills over my cheek. “Liar,” I whisper, feeling another tiny crack in my heart.

I close my eyes and try to shut it all out—everything they did, everything they are, who I let myself become before I tried to salvage the tattered threads of my dignity. I feel them both press in close, but I let my mind drift. Something tells me that while I’m here, sleep might be my only escape.

I dream of them both, like I always do. Their rough hands moving over my body, tugging on my sensitive nipples, fingers digging into my hips as I moan and writhe with pleasure. A tongue flicks over my clit as a hot, wet mouth closes over one of my nipples. The dual sensations make my hips lift,

seeking relief when there is none to be had. There never is.

Fingers slide inside me, and teeth nip and bite, leaving indentations in my skin like a map of proof for all the places they've worshiped. My body tenses in preparation as something coils tightly in my stomach. Heat licks up my spine as pleasure sparks an inferno in my nerves. It's always the same. The bliss will be all-consuming until I reach the pinnacle. But instead of falling over the edge into oblivion, I'll wake up in damp sheets with wet panties and a throbbing need that can't be sated with my fingers alone.

I spread my legs, seeking something—anything—when I feel a hard cock thrust inside me. My eyes snap, realizing my dream is reality.

As Creed's dark eyes stare into mine with such a savage look of possession, I come, unable to hold back any longer. I come with a scream that, for the first time, makes me grateful there are no neighbors.

Creed thrusts inside me hard and bellows my name as he comes too. Before I can catch my breath, I'm flipped over on my hands and knees, and Hawk is inside me. Creed maneuvers himself to the head of the bed and grips my hair, triggering another orgasm.

Taking advantage, Creed slips his still-hard cock, wet from our combined orgasms, into my mouth and urges me to suck. "Lick me clean, Avery. Remember how good we taste together."

Punch-drunk off my orgasms, I follow his command and let my tongue glide over him, sucking him in deep. Hawk's fingers dig into my ass as he fucks me so hard it's borderline painful.

"Jesus, Avery, your greedy pussy is sucking my cock in so deep. You might hate me, but your pussy remembers who it belongs to," Hawk growls a second before he pulls out and comes all over my ass.

Sliding his fingers through his cum, he thrusts his fingers inside me, making me whimper as I release Creed's cock with a pop.

"Doesn't matter how many cocks you let inside my pussy. I will always own every inch of you."

It's like a horn blows somewhere in my brain before my head is filled with a mix of white noise and pure, unfiltered rage. I scramble off the bed and bolt for the bathroom, my unexpected move shocking them enough that I manage to slip free before they can stop me.

I turn on the shower and climb in, dropping to my knees as my tears mix with the frigid water beating down on me. I give in to the anguish and anger and scream until my throat is hoarse and my skin is ice-cold to the touch.

I've spent years building up a defense against them that I thought was impenetrable. Yet it took them next to no time at all to smash through every layer of protection I cloaked myself in. They took a hammer to every defense I had, and I let them. I'm so fucking mad, but most of my anger is directed at myself. I knew better. And yet here I am, crying on yet another shower floor.

The door crashes open and smashes into the wall, but I don't look up. I'm too lost in my own self-loathing to sense the danger approaching. When I'm pulled into warm arms, I go willingly, having no fight left. I hear cursing and yelling, but the words are lost on me as I mentally scold myself.

Why do I keep allowing them to hurt me? And no matter how I spin it, that's the truth. They keep hurting me because I let them.

They tuck me in bed, their hands stroking and soothing me, along with softly whispered words that go in one ear and out the other. The gentle cadence is enough to lull me into a fitful sleep once more.

Chapter Ten

Hawk

She falls asleep between us, Creed passing out soon after her, but I can't settle. I can't get the look on her face out of my mind. There was so much hatred and self-loathing in her eyes it made me want to vomit. We were already balanced on a razor's edge, and I fear this might be the thing that shreds us to pieces.

Giving up on sleep, I climb out of bed and head out into the main room. I pour myself a glass of juice and head out to sit on the deck. The sun is just beginning to rise, casting the barn and meadow beyond it in a kaleidoscope of yellows and oranges, offering up hints of the warmth that's to come.

As much as I like the occasional disconnect from the world—no phones or internet, and the drama attached to it—there is one convenience I always miss—the AC. This reminds me too much of being in the sandbox.

I sip my juice, hesitating with the glass on my lips, when I realize I can still smell Avery on my fingers. And now I'm hard again.

"Christ, what is it about this woman?" I ask the universe, really hoping I get an answer. But nothing but the sound of the breeze blowing in the trees answers.

I take a deep breath and try to sort out where my head is at. I came here to get some answers and to finally work Avery out from under my skin. Yet, in a matter of hours, she's burrowed herself even deeper. I still need to know why she did what she did. I can't get my head wrapped around how something so good could turn so bad so fast. For months, I kept running over our moments together, trying to pinpoint where things started to crumble. But I just couldn't see it. Somehow, the happiest moments of my life were the ones that made Avery sad enough to walk away without a backward glance.

I'll admit, when Creed came home and told me about the girl he'd bumped into in the coffee shop, I was skeptical. We always knew we'd be looking for a third. It was something we were upfront about with women. We'd dated separately before, of course, but it always fell flat. Something always felt like it was missing. And it was. I have no designs on Creed, and he has none on me. But there is something about watching him with a woman, or having that woman pinned between us, completely at our mercy,

that made everything so much fucking hotter.

When he came home and said he'd asked her out and wanted me to come with him, I thought he'd lost his mind but figured it was an easy way to get rid of her. Imagine my surprise when she turned out to be every bit as enticing as Creed had promised. Sweet, sexy, and though nervous about the possibility of dating us both, there was a healthy dose of curiosity there too.

It took five dates for her to let me slide my dick inside her delectable body, but it only took one date for me to know I was hooked. It wasn't love. It was pure and simple lust on steroids. I couldn't get enough of her, and I know Creed felt the same way.

We spent every moment we could with each other, and it never felt forced. I'm not sure I expected forever, even after we were married. I couldn't help but assume there would be a shelf life to our relationship. A *best-before* date that we wouldn't notice until things started to turn sour. And I was right. I just never thought everything would fall apart as quickly as it did.

I don't know how long I sit outside before I hear the door open behind me. I look over my shoulder and see Creed with two mugs of coffee in his hand.

I place my empty juice glass on the floor near my feet and take the mug he offers me. "Thanks. Is she still asleep?"

"Yeah," he answers, sitting in the chair beside mine.

We sit quietly for a minute before he sighs. "I fucked up. I might have been asleep when it started, but I woke up way before it went too far. I should have stopped. I should have—"

"It was both of us, Creed. I was as much a part of it as you were. And honestly, even if she hates us for it, I don't regret it. It made me realize something."

"What's that?"

"That I missed her. I missed us. I missed how we were together. I came here wanting a clean break. Yet here I am, trying to think of all the ways I can put us back together again."

"I'm not sure we can do that unless we figure out what we broke in the first place. I've been going over and over it in my head, and I keep coming back to the same sticking point."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"That Avery wouldn't just leave us like that. She'd give us a chance to

apologize or explain, even if we hurt her badly.”

“What are you saying?”

“Fuck. I don’t know.” He scrubs his hand over his face. “We need to talk to her. Find out the truth without our anger getting in the way.”

“I’ll admit, I don’t know what the fuck to do here, Creed. We keep demanding answers, but the louder we yell, the more she wraps herself in silence.”

“She doesn’t trust us.”

“But why? What the fuck did we do?”

“I don’t know, but I think pushing her for answers will only backfire on us. We need to change tactics. Build the trust between us again.”

I blow out a breath and look away. “What’s our end game here, Creed? We set out to gain her trust and then blow it all apart once we have her answers and walk away?”

“Or maybe we think about not walking away. I know there are a lot of issues to work through. But tell me you’ve been happy since she’s been gone and I won’t push it. I know I, for one, have just been going through the motions. I’m not sure I truly understood how important she was to me until she was gone. But if the four years without her have taught me anything, it’s that no other woman has held a candle to her since. And I don’t think they ever will.”

“Maybe it’s just because we consider her the one that got away.”

“You’re right. It might prove once and for all that what we had belongs in the past. But...”

“But?”

“But if that were true, then we wouldn’t be here now, would we? We wouldn’t care what her reasons were for doing what she did. We would’ve cut her out and moved on.”

“And yet here we are.”

“Yeah, here we are.”

* * *

After spending some time repairing some of the broken decking, I head inside for a drink and a shower. The heat is getting to an unbearable level, and though I’m out of the sun’s harsh rays once I step inside, it’s like walking

into an oven.

“Jesus,” I mutter, grabbing a glass and filling it to the brim with water before gulping it down and refilling it once more.

I turn and lean against the counter when I spot Avery curled up in the corner of the sofa with a book in her hands. For a second, I think she’s so engrossed that she hasn’t noticed me, but then I notice how white her knuckles are from squeezing the pages so hard.

With a sigh, I walk over to her and take the seat beside her on the couch, careful to keep some distance between us. “What are you reading?”

She turns the book over so I can see the cover. It’s one I remember reading years ago about a town that mostly disappears into a huge hole in the earth, leaving the few remaining people fighting for survival.

“I thought you were a romance girl?”

“Yeah, well, things change.”

I slide the glass onto the table and sigh. I tug the book from her hands and place it next to my glass before taking both her hands in mine.

“I’m sorry about what happened last night,” I lie because I’m not sorry at all.

Her jaw clenches at my words as if she can see right through them, but she doesn’t call me on it.

“And I’m sorry for the way I spoke to you back at the hospital.”

That I am truly sorry about. I let my anger get away from me and spoke to her like shit. No matter how I feel about Avery, she deserves better than to be treated like something I scraped off my shoe.

She tilts her head—studying me—looking for the truth in my words before her shoulders relax. “Okay. I accept your apology.”

She moves to pull her hands free from mine, but I hold on tighter, making her wince,

“Are you okay? Do you need your meds?”

She shakes her head. “I’m fine.”

I sigh. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to act around you. You’re my wife, and yet you’re a stranger too.”

She bites her lip, so I continue.

“I’d like to get to know you better. I’ll take whatever you’re willing to share with me. If nothing else, I’d like to leave here friends, not enemies.”

She blows out a breath and nods. “Hating you is exhausting.”

“Then don’t hate me anymore.”

She huffs out a laugh that lacks any warmth or joy as she yanks her hands free. “Trust me, loving you is far harder.”

She climbs to her feet and makes her way to the kitchen before opening the fridge. I stare at her ass as she bends over. She’s wearing that huge T-shirt still, which slides up the back of her thighs until it almost shows her panties, but she stands up and turns to look at me before I can catch a glimpse.

“Do either of you mind if I cook?”

“As long as you don’t plan on poisoning us.”

“I make no promises. I just need to find something to do to pass the time, or I’ll go insane.”

“Knock yourself out, then. I’m going to take a shower, then I’ll help out. You know where Creed is?”

She shakes her head. “He said he was going for a walk, but that was a couple of hours ago.” She looks out the window and bites her lip. She might be mad at us, but she clearly still cares.

“Don’t worry about Creed. He knows this place like the back of his hand.”

“I wasn’t worried. Just wondering if I should make some food for him too.”

“I’m sure he’d appreciate it.”

I head to the shower and leave her alone in the kitchen, wondering if she’ll still be there when I get out or if I’ll have to hunt her through the woods. When my dick gets hard at the thought of hunting her down and fucking her on her knees in the dirt, I realize part of me wants her to make a run for it.

I grab my dick and give it a tug, picturing Avery on her knees in front of me. I give into the fantasy and stroke myself, imagining Avery’s hand wrapped around my aching cock. It doesn’t take me long to come, my only regret is that Avery isn’t here to drink down the evidence of what she does to me.

I dry off and wrap the towel around my waist before heading into the bedroom. With Avery busy, I slide the rug from beside the bed and tug open the trapdoor that leads to a crawl space that houses our bags. I search for clean shorts and boxers before closing the trapdoor and covering it with the rug. I have a brief pang of guilt about keeping Avery’s things from her, but any advantage I have at the moment is a win. She’s far more unlikely to try to leave in just her panties and a T-shirt than she is fully clothed.

Does that make me a dick? Sure, but it makes me a dick with my woman nearby and not lost in the woods somewhere. I slip my boxers and shorts on before heading out to the kitchen. The smell of onions frying makes my mouth water.

“Alright, what can I help with?”

She’s so lost in her thoughts that she jumps at the sound of my voice, making me grin.

“Asshole.”

“You want me to help with what now?” I tease.

Her face turns a pretty shade of pink as she whirls around and points a spatula at me. “Behave.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She mumbles something under her breath before sliding the bowl of ground beef toward me. “You can shape the burgers for me. Thank you.” She tucks on the end, making me grin.

“How’s your shoulder?”

“It’s sore, but the pain is more bearable than it was before. What am I supposed to do about physical therapy? The whole being kidnapped thing has kinda put a kink in my timetable.”

“Don’t worry, Creed said he was dealing with that.”

Avery doesn’t say anything, but I can see the wheels turning in her brain as she starts to formulate a plan.

“I have to warn you to be on your best behavior. I’d hate to have to punish you.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “That’s the second time you’ve threatened to punish me. Unless you’re planning to start sleeping with your eyes open, I suggest you make it your last.”

I focus on shaping the patties, but that doesn’t stop me from answering. “That’s not a threat, Avery. It’s a promise. But by all means, push my buttons. I think I’ll like showing you exactly what I’m capable of.”

Chapter Eleven

Avery

There is an intensity coming from Hawk that I don't think was there before. There were moments where his dominance shone through, but this is something else, and I'd be lying if I said it didn't make me nervous.

We eat in silence, with me not being able to think of a safe topic to talk about and Hawk seeming to enjoy my squirming. After cleaning up the dishes and leaving Creed's food wrapped up in the fridge, I wring my hands at the thought of having nothing to do once more. I could clean, but it looks like someone has recently done it. And honestly, there isn't much here to clean.

"Do you want to sit on the porch?"

I nod, figuring outside has to be better than in here, where the walls are beginning to feel like they're closing in on me.

"Go sit down. I'll grab us some drinks and follow you out."

I do as he says, keeping some distance between us as I pass him. I collapse into one of the chairs and take a deep breath before blowing it out. If I had a pair of ruby slippers, I'd be clicking my heels like a maniac right now because I'm beyond ready to go home.

I think back to my phone call with Lara and Bella. I know Lara will keep Bella safe, but when I don't call to check in, they'll worry, and that's the last thing I want. Lara's a grown adult. She might worry about what's going on with me, but she'll understand that things come up. Bella is six years old and will probably panic when I don't call her or come back, and she already carries the weight of the world on her shoulders.

I let my mind drift to Greg and then Evander. I wonder what they think of my disappearance or if they even know I'm missing. Worse, I wonder if they were in on it to begin with. It wouldn't be the first time I'd been fucked over by someone I trusted, but a part of me wasn't willing to write them off just yet. Especially E, though I'm not sure why it matters so much what he thinks of me.

I'm married, whether I like it or not. And not to just anyone, but two of his friends. Even if, after all this, they grant me a divorce, they'll never be okay with me having a relationship with him. Not that he would want one

with me. Who would want—

“What are you thinking about so hard?”

“Holy mother of God, don’t sneak up on me like that.” I press my hand to my chest and will my thundering heart to calm the fuck down.

“Now I really want to know what’s going on in that head of yours.”

I feel my cheeks flush. “None of your business,” I snap, my eyes dropping to his hands, which don’t carry drinks but my running shoes.

“I thought you might want to go for a walk.”

“Yes!” I yell, jumping up, making him chuckle. “Do I get pants too?”

“No, you don’t. Not until I know you won’t run.”

I roll my eyes at him. If he thinks the risk of flashing my ass would stop me from running, the man is sadly mistaken. The only thing keeping me here is that I’m miles away from anything else, and in this heat, I’ll keel over from sunstroke before I find civilization.

Sitting back down, I hold my hand out for my running shoes, but he drops to his knees and lifts one of my feet, sliding my sneaker on and setting it against his thigh. He laces it up before doing the same for my other foot.

Standing up, he holds his hand out to me. “Ready?”

Not wanting to risk him changing his mind, I slip my hand into his much larger one and let him pull me up. When I try to pull away, his hand tightens around mine as he leads me down the steps to the dusty driveway and towards the tree line.

“Won’t Creed wonder where we’ve gone?”

“I left him a note.”

It all feels so domestic. It’s almost easy to pretend everything is normal, but nothing about this situation is normal. I need to remember that. I fell for this bullshit before. I forgave myself because I didn’t know any better. This time around, I know exactly what they’re capable of. If I let them in and they tear what’s left of me apart, I’ll have no one to blame but myself.

We walk into the woods, which provides us with a little protection from the sun, and he keeps his hand wrapped around mine as I take in the beauty around us. No matter the reasons they brought me here, I can’t deny that there are worse places to find myself stranded.

Wildflowers grow in abundance, enticing bees and butterflies to flit from flower to flower. When the light brightens, I notice a large gap in the trees and stop to look up. The huge trees still surround us, but it’s as if they grew around this spot. I look down and try to figure out why, when Hawk steps to

the side and reveals a large pond.

“Oh wow. I think I just found my new reading spot.”

“Pretty, right?”

“Peaceful.”

He looks over his shoulder at me before nodding. “You wanna swim for a bit?”

“What, here?”

He shrugs. “Yeah sure, why not?”

He’s already kicking off his sneakers before shoving his shorts down his legs. He leaves his boxers on, thankfully, and walks into the water. “Come on, it’s warm.”

“Of course, it’s warm. It’s a million degrees out.” I bite my lip, already knowing this is a stupid idea, but the thought of heading back to the house makes me hesitate.

“Fuck it.” I kick my sneakers off and walk toward the water.

“Aren’t you going to take your T-shirt off?”

“I’m not wearing a bra.”

“I’ve had your tits in my mouth, Avery.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“Then it shouldn’t matter if you swim topless or not, right?” he taunts. “Besides, once that T-shirt is wet, it’s not going to leave anything to the imagination.”

I narrow my eyes at him, knowing he’s setting me up. But the truth is, if I get this T-shirt wet and they don’t give me a clean one, I’ll be forced to sleep without one at all. And we’re both aware of how dangerous a situation that would be after last night.

“You’ll keep your hands to yourself?”

“I’m just here to swim.” As if to prove it, he flips to his back and floats farther into the center of the pond.

With his attention elsewhere, I slip the T-shirt over my head and fold it, placing it on my sneakers before stepping into the water. It’s warm, like Hawk said, so I don’t waste any time sinking down into it so that it covers everything below my collarbone. I close my eyes for a second and let the quiet wash over me. All I can hear are the insects and the occasional splash from Hawk.

The water helps the tension leave my body as I start to swim. My arm feels like it’s on fire, but I don’t let it stop me. I keep my distance from

Hawk. If he attempts to make a move on me, I'll be out of the water before he's within touching distance.

The exercise feels good, though my bad arm is going numb, rendering it useless, and I tire quickly. Turning over so that I can float like Hawk, I don't give much thought to the display I'm putting on until I feel hands around my waist.

I shriek and feel myself beginning to sink before Hawk yanks me to his body.

"How the hell did you get to me like that?" I never even heard a splash.

"Navy SEAL, baby," he reminds me.

"Tricky bastard. You can let me go now."

"Nope. You're tired. I admit, I didn't think about your arm when I suggested this. Hell, I should have made sure the wound was covered," he growls, mad at himself as he swims us closer to the edge of the pond.

"No, wait," I say, looking over my shoulder. "I'm fine. Please. I don't want to leave yet. Just ten more minutes, then I swear I'll take a shower, and you can cover the thing with that gross-smelling cream that is supposed to kill ninety-nine percent of everything on earth."

He looks torn, so I turn and wrap my arms around his neck and look up into his eyes. "Please, Hawk."

"And you say I'm tricky. Fine, but I'll carry you. You've put your arm through enough for today."

I don't argue because I know he'd make me get out otherwise. The only problem, the hair on his chest is rubbing against my nipples, causing friction that's making my temperature rise.

Oh, this is so, so bad.

"Alright, maybe we should get out." My voice squeaks, making him look down at me with a frown.

"You were begging me to stay in a second ago. What's wrong?"

"I don't beg, and nothing's wrong. I just want to get out now."

His eyes move over my face before dropping to the top of my chest, which I know is flushed, and a wicked grin spreads across his face. "I think we should stay a little longer, Avery. Looks to me like you need to cool off."

"Hawk."

"Just trust me, okay?"

I swallow and feel myself pulling back. "I can't. I want to get out now." My voice is barely above a whisper, but I know he hears the sincerity in it

when he curses and carries me to the edge of the water, placing me gently on my feet.

I hurry over to my things and slip my T-shirt on over my head before shoving my feet back into my sneakers. I can feel Hawk's eyes on me, but I can't bring myself to look at him. I start heading back the way we came when Hawk steps around me and takes my hand, pulling me along in silence.

My heart feels like it's crumbling in my chest. I don't understand why, out of everything that's happened, this is the moment that cuts me the deepest. It makes no sense, and yet I swear I can feel my heart breaking all over again. Tears run down my face, blurring my vision, making me grateful that Hawk is leading us, or I'd probably break my neck.

I try to keep as quiet as possible, not wanting Hawk to see how upset I am. He would only ask questions, questions I either won't answer or can't. When we make it back to where I can see the house, I know I'm not going to be able to keep it together much longer. I shake Hawk's hand off and sprint toward the house, needing to put some distance between us before I lose it all together.

"Avery, wait!" he yells. But I keep going, my eyes solely focused on the door, which is why I don't see the body approaching from the side until arms wrap around me and yank me to a hard chest.

"No!" I snap, struggling to get free. The pain in my arm from my fight makes my tears fall harder.

"What the fuck is going on?" Creed yells as he tries to restrain me.

I start beating against his chest before my legs give out on me. He keeps me from falling, pulling me up into his arms and carrying me into the house.

"Why is she so wet? You better tell me what the fuck is going on, Hawk, before I beat it out of you."

"We went swimming in the pond. She was fine. I don't know what set her off."

"You took her in the pond?" he snaps, and I find myself being carried into the bathroom.

"Avery, look at me, sweetheart."

I lift my head and stare into Creed's worried eyes.

"I'm going to stand you up and wash you off, okay? I want to make sure your wound stays clean."

I nod slowly and brace my legs when he lowers me to my feet. I hold on to the wall for support, suddenly exhausted. The cold water makes me jolt,

but it soothes my overheated skin. I close my eyes as he strips me out of my T-shirt. I feel his hands running over my body, but I don't react until I feel them grip the edges of my underwear.

"They're soaked, Avery."

I shrug but don't bother putting up a fight as he slides them down my legs. When they drop to the floor of the shower, I step out of them, freezing only when I realize Creed has stepped into the shower with me. He's stripped out of everything but his boxers, but they do nothing to hide how hard he is. I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry.

"I'm just going to wash you, nothing else."

I thought he'd already done that, but then his hands move down over my stomach and keep going until he slides his fingers between my legs. His fingers glide backward and forward between the lips of my pussy, bumping my clit, which makes me gasp as I wait for his fingers to slip inside me. But he keeps his word and pulls back before turning me gently so he can wash my hair.

I find myself relaxing under his touch. It's impossible not to relax when someone is playing with my hair. I'm pretty sure my hairstylist has had to nudge me awake a time or two. By the time he's done, I'm feeling boneless.

It isn't until Hawk wraps me up in a towel and carries me into the bedroom that I realize that the rest of my toiletries are in the bathroom. Sitting me on the edge of the bed, Hawk takes a second towel from Creed and rubs my hair with it to get the excess water out. I watch them both warily, but I'm too drained to remain angry. Mostly, I feel fucking lost. My head tells me to act one way, my heart wants to act another, and my body has a will of its fucking own. I feel like I'm being torn to pieces.

Tugging me to my feet, Hawk unwraps the towel from my body and uses it to dry me.

"Here."

I look at Creed, who steps up behind Hawk with a T-shirt in his hand. Hawk takes it and shakes it out before turning back to me. I don't recognize it, so it must be one of theirs. I should be pissed they still won't let me have any of my clothes, but I'm grateful they're letting me have something.

"Think we should put some of the cream on first and maybe cover the wound?" Hawk looks at Creed, who steps closer and takes a look before shaking his head.

"Honestly, it looks good. I'll grab the cream, but I think the dressing is

unnecessary. Besides, she's still on the antibiotics the doctor prescribed her." His eyes drop down my body to my exposed pussy before he swallows and walks away.

I look away as Hawk crowds me, but he's having none of that. His finger slides under my jaw as he tips my head back to look at him. "What happened out there, Avery? What did I do?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters. Everything fucking matters. Just tell—"

Creed walks back in with a glass of water in one hand and some cream in the other. He nudges Hawk aside and hands me the glass before pulling a few pills from his pocket. "Take these, and then I'll put some of this cream on, alright?"

I take the pills and swallow them down before handing him back the glass. He passes it to Hawk, who I can still feel watching me. I grit my teeth as Creed applies a small amount of cream to the healing gunshot wound before allowing Hawk to slip the T-shirt over my head. It hits me mid-thigh and smells like Creed, so I guess that answers the question of who it belongs to.

"Do you want something to eat?"

"I'm going to lie down now, but thank you," I answer politely, not wanting them to force the issue. I can sense they both want to.

"Right. Well, you rest then, and we'll talk afterward, okay?"

I nod before climbing onto the bed and turning away from them.

"Come on, man, give her some space," Creed urges Hawk. He must comply because, when the door closes, I sense I'm alone.

I let the tears fall once more, finding them cathartic in a way. I don't move from my spot. I don't make any effort to join them, not even when the sky starts to get dark outside the window. Instead, I let the sounds of them talking and moving around lull me to sleep.

Chapter Twelve

Creed

“**Y**ou want to tell me what that was all about?”

“Fuck if I know.” Hawk sighs, running his hands through his hair. “She was fine. I could tell she was starting to feel a little claustrophobic, so I took her for a walk. I forgot about the pond until I saw it. I remembered how much she likes the water, though.”

“You should, considering it was you who taught her how to swim. Still, a dirty pond and an open wound? Not your best idea.”

“Like I said, I wasn’t thinking. Besides, you’re one to talk. Where the hell did you disappear to?”

“I needed to get to higher ground. Had some calls to make.” He looks at me and waits for more. “Got someone coming to do PT with Avery tomorrow. They can come twice a week until we leave.”

“That gonna be enough?”

“The doc seems to think so, but we’ll know for sure when the PT assesses her.”

“And what’s the cover story you went with?”

I move to grab a beer out of the fridge, holding one out for Hawk to take too. “I told them it was a national security issue. And they’d need to sign an NDA and not listen to a word our guest might say.”

“You basically told them Avery was our prisoner.”

“It was the only way to guarantee they’d ignore whatever Avery might tell them.”

“Fuck, Creed, don’t you think this is just going to make everything worse?”

“You went along with this plan, Hawk. Don’t change your mind just because she let you in her pussy. Sex won’t fix this shit.”

“That’s a cheap fucking shot, and you know it.”

I slam my beer down on the counter and look toward the bedroom, lowering my voice so Avery doesn’t hear me. “You were the one who told me that you missed her. That you’d like a chance to fix things, right? That was just this morning. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten already.”

“Fuck you, Creed. Stop twisting my words to fit your needs.”

“My needs? I didn’t hear you complaining when you were fucking her.”

He shoves me back, making me stumble.

“I’m not saying I don’t want her back. I’m questioning how we’re going about it. We didn’t plan for any of this. We wanted to break her. But fuck me, Creed, that’s not an option anymore.”

I stare at him, my chest heaving.

“In my head, I had built her up to be this callous bitch. I pictured her walking away without looking back, a smirk on her face, and our money in her pocket. But that’s not the woman in our bed. She’s broken, and I have this awful feeling that we’re the reason why.”

I lean my arms on the counter and sigh. He’s not telling me anything I haven’t already figured out for myself. “I get that, but she needs physical therapy, and this is the best way to go about it. We can’t undo what we’ve done. If we let her leave now, she’ll be gone. And there will be no fixing anything.”

“I know. We talked about this, but I’m still not sure it’s the right play. What about if we take her back to Apex?”

I snort and look at him incredulously. “We’d be lucky if the guys didn’t shoot us themselves.”

He grumbles something but doesn’t dispute it. “What time are they coming?”

“Eleven.”

“Alright. We’ll just have to play it by ear.”

I nod because that’s all we can do. “So, about earlier.”

“We were swimming. I snuck up on her, which she didn’t like. I remembered about the wound and started carrying her to the edge of the pond, but she begged me to stay for a little while longer. I’m still a sucker for those eyes of hers, apparently, because I can’t tell her no. Next thing I know, she’s begging to get out.”

I frown.

“Ah, shit.” I see a light bulb go off over his head as he clenches his hands into fists.

“You figured it out?”

“I asked her if she trusted me. She told me no, and that’s when everything went downhill. I should have realized that was it. But because she’d started panicking before that, I didn’t make the connection.”

“Why was she panicking?”

“She was in my arms, practically naked. I think she was getting turned on.”

“Oh yeah, that would do it. And after last night, can we blame her for not trusting us?”

“Her reaction, though, Creed, it was extreme. That much pain and hurt came from somewhere far deeper than an offhanded comment about trust.”

“It’s not offhanded, though, is it? Trust is important to her and to us. You asked her to trust you a day after we kidnapped her.”

When he doesn’t say anything, I take a different angle. “Do you trust her?”

His face looks pained for a second before he shakes his head. “No. I want to, but I can’t. Not yet, anyway.”

“I imagine she feels the same. Only times a hundred. We’re calling all the shots out here. She has no way of escaping us. If we wanted to, we could easily overpower her.” I raise my hand when he looks like he’s going to interrupt. “I’m not saying we would. Relax. But we are withholding her clothes and shoes. We’ve taken away her ability to contact the outside world and anyone she may have out there worrying about her.”

“Well, when you put it like that, it sounds bad.”

I stare at him for a second before we both dissolve into laughter.

“We are so fucked. I’ll admit, we might not have been in the right state of mind when we decided kidnapping was our only option, but...”

“But?”

“But I can’t argue with the results. I know we can break through that wall if we just try.”

“And hopefully, she’ll forgive us so we don’t end up charged with a felony,” he jokes.

I shake my head. “We need to let her lick her wounds, but still talk her into staying. We have a lot to work through.”

“She has a life away from Apex now. A life we’re not a part of.”

“Astrid had one too, and yet, now that she’s back here, she’s never been happier.”

“How do we know she won’t just leave again?”

“We don’t. Which is why we need to figure out why she left in the first place.”

“Do you think...” he leans closer, looking at the door briefly before lowering his voice. “Do you think she knows why you married her?”

I glare at him, making sure the door is still closed. “No. There is no way she could know. There was only you, me, Cooper, and Kay that knew the truth. And they’re dead. Besides, it might have started out one way, but it quickly became more than that.”

“I’m not saying it wasn’t. I’m just trying to figure it out.”

“We’ve been over it a million times. Until Avery decides to tell us why, we’ll never know the truth.”

He nods before walking over to the window and looking outside. “We’ll start fresh tomorrow. After the PT is over. We’ll pretend like the past never happened. The questions can wait until she trusts us. It’s not like we’re going anywhere.” He looks at me with a smirk.

“Why does it feel like we’re going into battle?”

“Because we are. And if we play this right, Avery will be the spoils of war.”

* * *

Avery is up before both Hawk and me. I climb out of bed and find her in the kitchen, sipping coffee. She looks at me over the rim of her mug as I approach.

“There any more?”

She nods and steps aside so I can see the full pot behind her.

I pour myself a cup and stand next to her. “Someone is coming today to do some exercises with you. Do you want to shower before they get here or wait until after?”

“In this heat, I doubt it matters. Can I have something to wear other than this? Underwear would be good for a start. I’d hate for the therapist’s fingers to slip and end up somewhere they shouldn’t.”

I turn in to her, careful that I don’t knock either of our drinks. “Nobody else will be touching you inappropriately.”

“Nobody else? How about we just stick with nobody?”

Not wanting to start another fight, I keep quiet. But if she thinks me and Hawk will be able to keep our hands to ourselves, she’s insane.

I change the subject. “Would you like some breakfast?”

“I can make it.”

I’m about to refuse when I remember Hawk’s words from yesterday. The

last thing we want is her climbing the walls because she might decide a twenty-mile walk is worth the risk. “Sounds good. We’re not picky. We’ll eat pretty much anything, especially if it’s breakfast.”

“I know. I remember.” She smiles tightly.

Right, of course she does.

“I’ll take a shower and then figure out the clothes thing.”

“Thank you.”

“Avery?”

She lifts her eyes to mine, waiting for me to continue, but words fail me.

“I’ll be back.”

“I’ll be right here.”

I leave my coffee on the counter and blow out a breath as I head back to the bedroom.

Hawk is sitting up in bed, stretching, when I walk in. He takes one look at my face and frowns. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, unless you consider I have the game of a goldfish.”

“Game of a, huh?”

“Avery. I’m trying to be charming, you know.”

He grins and climbs out of bed. “Do you even know how to be charming?”

“Man, fuck you. I’m charming as hell.”

“If you say so.”

“You don’t know because I’ve obviously never used my moves on you.”

“There is a God,” he mutters. “And who, pray tell, has been lucky enough to...” His voice trails off as realization washes over both of us.

Avery is the only person I bothered charming, which means she’ll see through any attempt I make. “Fuck,” I curse. None of this is going to plan.

Hawk shakes his head and laughs all the way to the bathroom.

Asshole.

Chapter Thirteen

Avery

I never thought it would feel so good to be wearing a pair of shorts again. I tug them into place before slipping my tank top on. That one's a little trickier, but the built-in bra means I won't have to fight my way into a sports bra.

My arm is healing better than I imagined it would. And though my situation is crappy, I'm happy that I'm in much less pain than I thought I'd be. Sure, certain movements hurt more than others. Raising it seems to be the worst. Given what I went through, I think I'm incredibly lucky the bullet didn't do more damage than it did.

I was too out of it when the doctor told me about how I was shot by the best kind of bullet. I remember snorting, wondering if he had been sampling my drugs. Now I realize he meant that a larger caliber would have shattered my shoulder. Most of the bruising and the wound size are because of the surgical team having to go in and dig the bullet out.

"So, you want me to put your hair up into a ponytail?"

I turn at the sound of Creed's voice and wonder how long he's been standing there watching me. I bite back a frustrated growl, not wanting to be reliant on them for anything, but putting my hair up is gonna hurt, and I'd rather not start physical therapy already in pain. "Please."

I turn back around as he steps up behind me and gathers all my hair. He picks up the brush from the bed and smooths everything back. I slip the hair tie off my wrist and hold it up for him to use to secure my hair.

As soon as he's done, I take a step away and turn to face him again. "Thanks. Do you know what time they'll be here?"

"Their truck just pulled up. That's why I came to find you. Are you ready for this? If it's too soon, you can wait a couple of days."

I shake my head. "No, I'm fine."

He pauses at the word fine, likely knowing that when a woman says she's fine, she is anything but. Shaking his head, he opens the door and motions for me to go ahead.

I walk into the main room and head toward the sitting area. I ignore Hawk, my eyes fixed on the beautiful woman touching his arm as she laughs.

I have no idea why I expected a man. Wishful thinking, I guess. I think my romance book-loving brain had conjured up a badass who would take one look at my situation and whisk me away from here.

Looking at the woman fawn all over Hawk, I realize I've been living in la-la land.

Creed's hand on the small of my back makes me jump, and he urges me to move forward. I let him lead me closer until the woman looks up and her eyes land on me. She smiles politely before standing, her eyes drifting to Creed briefly. The smile she offers him is a heck of a lot warmer than the one she just gave me. I bite my lip, not wanting to act like a petty bitch. These men might still technically be my husbands, but they're not really mine. Besides, it's not their fault how she acts toward them.

I move closer and offer her my good hand. "Hi. I'm Avery."

She looks at my hand for a second before reaching out with her own. Her nails are a pretty shade of pink, making me super conscious of my plain ones.

"Jess," she says before shaking. It's a weak-ass handshake, but again, I shake it off. Maybe she's not a fan of handshakes.

"Jess here is gonna look after you. Hawk and I will leave you to it, but we won't be far. So just yell if you need anything," Creed says as I look at Hawk, who, for some reason, looks uncomfortable.

I look from him to Jess and frown. Was I interrupting? I shake my head and snort. I don't even care. He can do what he wants. If that leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, then so be it.

"Sounds good, but I don't expect any issues. Right, Avery?" Jess smiles tightly.

I just nod because I'm not sure I'm reading her correctly. She doesn't seem to like me. But that can't be right. She doesn't even know me. Still, I can't shake the weird vibe I'm getting.

"I just want to get my shoulder back to normal."

After another somewhat uncomfortable pause, Creed nods before indicating to Hawk for them to leave. Both me and Jess watch them go before she turns back to me. Her eyes move over my body, taking in my yoga shorts, which are virtually the same as hers, only mine are black and hers are pink.

Her black sports bra pushes her boobs up and shows off her toned stomach and arms. Her long blonde hair, that's a few shades lighter than mine, is pulled back into a slick ponytail like mine as well. To be honest, we look kind of similar, though she is far more put together than me currently.

And where she's fit from the gym, I'm naturally lean like my mother. My exercises of choice are usually yoga and Pilates, which help keep me toned and strong, just in a different way than Jess. Our main difference is my two inches of height on her and the three inches of makeup on her face. I've never understood people who wear makeup to work out, but to each their own.

"Where do we start?" I ask when she keeps moving her eyes over me, studying me.

"You were shot in the shoulder, correct?"

I nod. "Just under my shoulder blade. I was lucky there was minimal damage. It still hurt like heck, though."

"I bet. Getting shot is never fun. Still, it takes a special kind of coward to shoot someone who's running away." She moves to grab one of the dining chairs and carries it over to the middle of the room as I frown at her words.

Clearly, she knows nothing about what happened. "I wasn't running away, and the shooter wasn't a coward. She was just an emotionally abused woman who snapped."

She doesn't say anything, just points for me to sit down on the chair. "I don't pretend to know the details, nor do I care. My job is simply to help you regain full range of motion in your arm."

"If you don't care, don't make assumptions," I tell her before shutting up.

"Look, I realize this isn't the best situation for either of us. I'm here as a favor to my... friends." She smirks as she straightens out my injured arm, making me hiss as she lifts it. "But if you do what I ask of you, you'll recover faster than if you just sit and pout about how unfair life is."

My mouth drops open in shock. Okay, I'm not imagining it. This woman is a bitch. "You don't know anything about me." I grit my teeth when she moves my arm to the point of pain.

She changes the angle and rotates my arm again to the point of pain, holding it until I want to scream at her.

"It will hurt, but you have to push through it. You can go a little farther than you are, but you're anticipating the pain, so you tense before you get there. Try to breathe through it for me while I run through it again."

I do as she asks, thankful she remains professional despite her animosity toward me. I breathe through the pain as she pushes harder than before. A couple of tears slip free when it feels like my arm is going to snap, but she eases up on me, which makes the pain recede, and a dull ache takes its place.

We don't talk for the rest of the session beyond her giving me commands

and me following them. Once I'm done, my arm is shaking, and sweat coats my tank top.

She steps back and looks at me like she's thinking about what she wants to say for a minute before she speaks. "You did good."

"Doesn't feel like it, but thank you."

"They won't hurt you, you know."

The sudden change in conversation gives me whiplash.

"They might look scary, but they are good men. I don't know what will happen to you in the future, but while you're here, they won't hurt you. I just thought you should know that. Woman to woman."

I stand on wobbly legs, a little dumbfounded. The hostility seems to have shifted to pity, and yet I have no idea why she thinks she's entitled to feel either.

"I didn't ask for your opinion or feelings on the subject. I thought you were here to help deal with my arm, not my heart. And how you can stand there and preach all this to me when you have no idea what's going on is laughable."

"I know what's going on. Creed told me. I'll admit, I'd expected you to tell me some story by now, but—"

I hold up my hand to stop her. "I'm married to those two men out there. Have been for four and a half years. I'm here because I took a bullet meant for Creed. I'm here because they drugged and kidnapped me. I'm here because they need psychological fucking help. So don't tell me you know. Because if you do and you condone their actions, you're just as fucked up in the head as they are."

She walks closer to me, putting a sway in her hips that is wasted on me. I take a second to appreciate the extra couple of inches I have on her when she opens her mouth and rips me to shreds.

"I call bullshit. I might not know much, but I know they're not cheaters. And since I've had the pleasure of warming Hawk's bed a time or two, I know you're lying. And kidnapping? Really?" She shakes her head as if disappointed, but all I can hear is white noise and the echo of her words about her warming Hawk's bed, because she's not lying. I knew they'd moved on, of course they had, but I didn't need to know it had been with the 2.0 version of me.

"Thanks for your help, Jess, but don't come back. I think I've had all the help I can stomach from you."

I turn and walk back to the bedroom, feeling her eyes on me until I close the door and lean against it.

What the hell? No wonder she was acting the way she did. In her mind, she had a claim on them. Or at least Hawk. To her, I'm the interloper. I'm not even mad at her anymore. It's clear she's only been given limited information. But to bring her here? Why would they do that unless it was to hurt me?

My arm throbs, in stark contrast to the numbness the rest of my body is feeling. I walk to the bathroom without consciously thinking about it and strip off before stepping into the cold shower. I wash away the sweat from my session, my mind elsewhere, before I climb out and wrap a towel around myself.

I'm still dripping wet as I walk back to the bed and sit on the edge of it. I don't know how long I sit there before the door opens. Creed and Hawk walk in and stare at me, their eyes blazing a path across my exposed skin before I look up at them.

"How'd it go?" Creed questions.

My eyes are on Hawk, who must read something in my expression because his face pales. "I would never have done that to you."

"Avery," he whispers, sounding tortured.

"What am I missing?" Creed looks between us, confused.

"You don't know? It wasn't something you planned to trigger me?"

"Trigger you? I have no idea what you're talking about."

Hawk rubs a hand over his face before looking at Creed. "Jess and me..." his voice trails off as if it hurts him to admit the rest, but it doesn't hurt him anywhere near as much as it does me.

"Jess and you what?" Creed turns to look at me before his eyes widen with understanding. "Oh fuck. No, Avery, I wouldn't do that to you. I didn't know."

He turns to Hawk, his fists clenched tightly at his sides. "Why the fuck didn't you say something?"

"I didn't fucking know who you hired. You never said. I was blindsided when she walked in, and then you were bringing Avery out. What was I supposed to say?"

"How about, 'I fucked her, so this won't work!'" he yells, making me flinch.

"Shit. I'm sorry, Avery. I didn't think. I"—I raise my hand to shut him up

—“didn’t know she was going to say anything. I thought you could get through today, and I’d make sure she didn’t come back.”

I glare at Hawk, who finally shuts his mouth.

“I want to go home now, please. I don’t care about anything else. I just want to go home.”

Hawk’s shoulders drop. For one moment, I think he’ll agree before he stands taller and walks closer. He reaches for my face, but I turn away, not wanting him to see the tears in my eyes. “I can’t let you go,” he admits, pulling me to his chest.

He holds onto me tightly, a desperation in his grip. I keep my arms loosely at my side. “It was a long time ago. I have no interest in Jess. I swear. Hell, I only slept with her because she reminded me of you.”

I shove him away.

“No,” he curses as he reaches for me again, but Creed steps between us.

“You never told me you’d slept with her.” His voice is seething with anger.

“I don’t report to you, Creed.”

Creed shakes his head before blowing out a breath. “Any progress we made, you just blew to pieces.”

“Oh, give me a fucking break. What progress, Creed? Avery still hates us as much now as she did this morning,” Hawk snaps defensively as I move out of the way, standing on the opposite side of the bed in case they come to blows.

“You should have told me,” Creed says quietly.

“You’d have judged me for it. I didn’t need that from you. I was so fucking angry. Angry at Avery. At you. You wanted me to tell you how I used Jess to get over Avery? How a little hate fucking cured me? Impossible. Because a moment’s reprieve left me with days of guilt and self-loathing until the only person I was left angry with was myself.”

Hawk looks at me and swallows. “I never meant to hurt you, Avery. But we weren’t together. You left. And unlike Creed, I didn’t think you’d ever come back. I wanted to get over you so fucking bad, but I swear to you, things are different now.”

“That’s just it, Hawk. We’re all different. The girl you married isn’t here. She was an idiot.”

“Hey, don’t say that,” Creed scolds me, making me huff out a laugh.

“Why? It’s true. She had nothing but hearts in her eyes. Hearts that didn’t

just break, they shattered. I cried a fucking river over you. I have nothing left to give. So please, if you ever cared for me, just let me go.”

“I love you,” Creed says so quietly that I almost miss it. I wait for the fire to lick up my skin with his lie. When it doesn’t, I know he’s telling the truth, and somehow that’s even worse.

“You’re in love with the idea of me, but you don’t know me. You never really did.” My tears fall now as I lose the strength to keep them at bay.

“Don’t tell me how I feel.” He steps closer, grabbing my arm.

I shake my head and turn away, walking over to the window and gazing out. There isn’t a cloud in the clear blue sky. But I can’t help but feel like a storm could roll in at any moment.

“Why? You’ve been telling me what to do since we got here. Calm down and we’ll give you this, speak up and we’ll tell you that, admit this and everything will all work out. I feel like I’m in the middle of a war. Only ours is psychological. So far, the wounds have been minor, but today’s stunt just proves that we can hurt each other far deeper. If we stay here like this, the damage we do to each other will be irreparable.”

“Because you’ve already made up your mind that we want to break you,” Hawk growls.

“Don’t you? You didn’t bring me here to love me, no matter if your feelings have changed. Do you know how that feels? To be kidnapped by men who you once loved with your whole heart because they were angry at you. Because you deserve answers. All I hear is you, you, you. Not once have you ever thought about what I deserve.”

“You deserve to be happy. We all do. And we can be if—”

I snarl at him.

“I deserve to be free. And if you can’t give me that, then the least you can do is leave me the fuck alone for a few hours.”

“Sweetheart...” Hawk implores, but I shake my head.

“I’m not your sweetheart. I’m not your anything. I’m just a girl you used to know. The sooner you realize that, the better.”

Chapter Fourteen

Evander

I frown at the screen, wondering if I fucked up somewhere. I retrace my steps, but the answer still comes up the same.

“What’s wrong?” Zig steps up beside me, staring at the information on the screen.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

“Is it a lead on Avery?”

I shake my head. “Everything is a dead end so far, but I’ll keep looking. Nobody saw her check out. Nobody remembers seeing her come home after she was discharged from the hospital. No cameras caught her.” I sigh as my fingers fly over the keys once more.

“I’m still waiting on Paul to get back to me with the results for the prints he lifted, but at this rate, I’m not sure we’ll find anything useful. Whoever took her knew what they were doing.”

“If she was taken. I’m not saying I disagree with you. I’m just not willing to put all our eggs in one basket. She might have been forced to run and actively hide herself so she couldn’t be tailed.”

“I know. I feel like I’m close, but I’m missing something.”

“You’ll figure it out. You always do. Did you manage to reach Creed and Hawk yet?”

“No, and that’s what I was frowning about when you came in. The payment for their current job just hit the account.”

“Thought it wasn’t due until the job was finished.”

“It isn’t—or wasn’t—but I’ve checked it three times. It’s definitely been paid. In fact, it was paid four days ago.”

Zig shrugs. “Well, at least they paid. Makes a nice change not to have to chase someone for it.”

“True.”

“Let’s hope Creed and Hawk deliver then, because I don’t do refunds.” He slaps my back and walks away, leaving me to focus on work again.

I get a hit a little later on a rental car registered in Avery’s married name. I pull up the details and curse when I remember seeing the car parked outside the motel. I dismissed the vehicles because none were parked close to

Avery's room. Angry at myself for not thinking about it before, I call the motel and ask them to check if the car is still there.

While I wait, I shake my head at my stupidity. She came home from the hospital in an Uber, so I didn't think about her having a car when I should have. Of course, she came home in an Uber. She went to the ER in a fucking ambulance, for Christ's sake.

It dawns on me, then. Something else I'd missed. Standing, I start to pace until the motel clerk comes back on the line.

"Hello, sir?"

"Is it still there?"

"It is. Is there anything—"

I hang up before he can finish and drop back down into my chair, my mind going in a million directions. Avery was shot at the diner. So, how the fuck did the rental end up back at the motel?

My fingers fly over my keyboard as I hack into the security cameras from the diner. They, like the motel, don't have many—one on each of the entrances and exits and one that covers the parking lot. I go back to the morning of the shooting and watch it from there. I see a car pull in and watch Avery climb out. Her car is the only car in the lot for the first fifteen minutes before Creed and Hawk pull up in Creed's car. I watch them laugh about something and head inside. Ten minutes later, another pulls up—the car containing the female shooter and her cheating boyfriend.

That reminds me, I'll need to talk to Paul and find out if the cops did a follow-up interview with him.

My cell rings as I speed up the footage. The ambulance and police arrive and leave through the frames as I answer.

"Evander."

"Hey, Ev. Got those prints for you," says the man I was just thinking about.

I slow the feed so I can watch and listen to Paul at the same time. "Anything jump out?"

"You mean, aside from the fact that the girl was a neat freak?"

"What?"

"There should have been dozens of prints in that place. You know what goes down over there, and they won't be winning any housekeeping awards anytime soon. So, imagine my surprise when I only pulled six sets of prints. One of which belongs to Damon Denton."

“Damon Denton? Why does that name ring a bell?”

“Local pimp and dealer who has recently been dabbling in producing porn.”

“What the fuck? He was in her room?”

“Likely before your girl was ever renting it. His prints were lifted from the air vent and the mirror. He runs his girls out of a few of those rooms. And I can confirm that he was in county lockup from the day before Avery was shot until lunchtime today. He had nothing to do with her leaving, not unless he had someone else grab her. But honestly, Ev, that’s not this guy’s MO. He’s not the sharpest tool in the shed, but he’s smart enough to know he’s not. He won’t employ men smarter than he is. He likes to be the big man on campus, if you like, so he wouldn’t have sent someone in after Avery. Not someone smart enough to not leave prints and clean up the crime scene afterward, at least. He employs thugs, that’s it.”

“How do you know the other prints don’t belong to one of his men?” I ask, looking at the video as a figure approaches Avery’s car. A very familiar figure.

“Because one set belongs to Avery herself.”

I listen to him as Creed climbs into Avery’s car and reverses out of the parking spot.

“And the other sets belong to you and your men.”

My eyes close in frustration. “Creed and Hawk?”

“Do they also go by Thomas Creed and Daniel Michaels or Greg—”

“Yeah, that’s them.”

“Except for Damon, nobody but Apex went into that room, according to the prints. And if they did, they wore gloves. Nobody wears fucking gloves in a motel, Ev, unless they’re in the system and want to hide who they are. I don’t like to speculate, but either your girl took off on her own or she has a professional on her. I’ll follow up with Damon, but like I said, I doubt he knows anything. I’ll keep you posted, though.”

“Thanks, Paul.”

I hang up and pause the video of the car disappearing from view of the diner’s camera. Neither Creed’s nor Hawk’s prints should have been in that room. Even if they figured out which car was Avery’s and decided to return it while she was in the hospital, there would be no reason for them to be in her room. Given their current relationship, Avery would never have given them her key. She sure as hell wouldn’t have asked them to grab things for her.

Besides, in the feed I pulled of her leaving the hospital, she was wearing hospital scrubs.

Standing up, I grab my laptop and keys before jogging downstairs. Greg's in the kitchen when I walk in. He takes one look at me, puts down the cup he was drinking from, and walks toward me. "What's wrong?"

James, who's sitting on the sofa in the living room, looks over.

"One of the sets of prints in Avery's motel room belongs to a pimp named Damon Denton. The guy's involved in the porn industry. He was apparently in lockup when Avery disappeared, however, so I don't think he's involved. But his prints were found on the scene, so it's worth checking out."

James gets up and joins us. "Do you know where his prints were found?"

"The mirror and the air vents. Why?"

James and Greg look at each other before James answers. "Both are places where small, unnoticeable cameras could be hidden."

"Son of a bitch. You think he was making videos of Avery without her knowing? With, what, the intent to upload them to a porn site?"

"It happens more than you think. Women being filmed getting changed or masturbating, thinking they are alone and safe. There's a market for everything out there," James tells me.

"Want me to go talk to this guy?" Greg asks.

"Yeah. My police contact says he's going to follow up, but I'd rather you got there first. See if he knows anything."

"If he was filming, he might have caught Avery's disappearance on camera."

"Paul says he's not that smart, so I'm guessing whatever he has in place isn't too complicated. If he's filming Avery, it will either go right back to whatever device he has the camera connected to, like his laptop, or it will be a closed feed and save directly to the camera itself, like on an SD card. Those will only hold so much, though, before they run out of space and need replacing. I'll head back to the motel and check the room for cameras. You talk to this Damon guy."

"Alright, I'll head out now. Text me his details and address. James, you wanna come?"

"I'm game."

"Call me if you find anything useful," I tell them.

"We will," Greg agrees, his face lined with worry. He cares about Avery too. I know the others think she might have left on her own, but Greg and I

think it was something more than that.

I head to my car and drive back to the motel. I know from talking to the clerk this morning that the room is still vacant, so I jimmy the lock and walk in, placing my laptop on the bed. I check the mirror, front and back, but don't find any cameras. The air vent doesn't show anything from the outside, so I take out my pocket knife and unscrew the cover. Sure enough, inside is a small camera. One that looks like it's motion-activated.

I check out the device and head back to my laptop. I connect to the Wi-Fi and dig around. Sure enough, there it is. The camera is on a live feed.

It takes me minutes to access the feed, which I download. As I wait for it, I call Hawk and then Creed. The voicemail kicks in for both of them, so I leave a message to call me back immediately. Then I call Paul again.

"You find something?"

"No, I just have a quick question. Where did you find my guys' prints?"

He's quiet for a second. "Something I need to know?"

"No, I'm just trying to work something out."

"Right." He doesn't sound convinced, but he doesn't push for more. Just as well, really. I'm not sure what I could say that doesn't sound bad. I trust my brothers, but some primal instinct in me is telling me to brace myself.

"Okay, here we go. Do you want them individually or collectively?"

"Collective is fine."

"Found prints on the door, the dresser, the fridge—both on the handle and on the inside of the door. One in the bathroom, on the sink, and then on the cell phone. That help?"

I nod, even though he can't see me. "Yeah. I'm just trying to remember the details."

"Alright. Call me if you need me."

He hangs up as I start to play the now-downloaded video file from the day Avery came back. I sit and watch as Hawk and Creed make their way inside and search the room. Then watch as Creed hands something to Hawk, and Hawk slips it into a bottle of water from the fridge.

I grip the laptop so tight I'm surprised I don't crack it. What the actual fuck are they doing? I didn't want to believe they were capable, even when everything started to point their way. It just made no sense. But now...

My focus snaps to the screen as Hawk leaves and Creed hides under the bed. I have to stop the video and put the laptop down to pace for a minute. I'm so angry that it takes everything in me not to put my fist through the wall.

Eventually, I calm down enough to finish watching, but the calm doesn't last. I watch Avery return, drink the water, and pass out with next to nothing on. I'm so pissed that it takes me a moment to realize I'm hard. It seems even my anger can't stop my body's reaction to Avery's smooth and creamy skin. But I ignore it as I continue to watch the video. Creed eventually crawls out from under the bed and pulls out his phone. Within moments, Hawk returns. Creed pops the back off Avery's phone and takes the SIM card before they both maneuver Avery's unconscious body into a T-shirt. Hawk scoops her up and carries her outside while Creed grabs everything, makes the bed, and leaves the phone on the bedside table.

The video has no sound, so I can't hear them, but it doesn't take a genius to know they thought they'd be in and out, and with the room left as it was, we'd all just assume Avery up and left again. Maybe I would have if I hadn't spoken to her at the hospital and found out what's going on in her life. She came here to help and get help in return, and these motherfuckers drug her and sneak out with her. They have no idea the danger she could be in.

Blowing out a breath, I upload a virus so that when Damon opens the file, it will invade his computer and erase everything on it. As much as I'd like to turn it over to the cops and have this asshole prosecuted, they can't use it as evidence when I've illegally obtained it. Plus, I don't think Avery could afford the exposure.

Next, I run a trace on the trackers I put in Hawk's and Creed's cells. All our phones are traceable using GPS, but since everything that happened with Oz and Zig, I've added trackers to the phones too. Even if the phone is off or damaged, I can still locate it.

And right now, both those fuckers are in the same spot. I check the coordinates against a map and the list of properties owned by Apex and its members and get a hit. I email the info to my phone and shut down my laptop. I yank the camera out of the air vent and screw the cover back into place before heading out to my car with everything.

I toss the laptop and camera on the front seat and grip the steering wheel, taking in a few deep breaths to calm the raging anger coursing through me. As much as I want to go pick up Avery alone, I know I can't. Creed and Hawk are acting unpredictable, and I won't risk Avery's safety by making decisions when I'm angry.

Pulling out my cell, I call James.

"Hey, Ev, we're just pulling onto Damon's street."

“Don’t bother. It’s not him. Meet me at the motel, and don’t tell anyone else you’ve spoken to me.”

“What’s going on?” His voice is serious, and I can hear Greg asking in the background what’s wrong.

“I’ll explain when you get here.”

I hang up before they can ask any more questions. I open the laptop again and type coordinates into the map before pulling up the street view. There is no street view, though, because the property is in the middle of fucking nowhere. Instead, I piggyback off a satellite—that would get me thrown into jail if NASA found out—and finally manage to get some images of the old house sitting on a few acres of land. Some of it is field, but a lot of it is dense forest. It won’t be easy to sneak up on them. Not unless I park on the other side of the trees and hike through. The terrain looks level enough to not cause too many issues.

I run my hands through my hair as I plan my route. The only thing I try not to think about is what state Avery will be in when I find her. I have to believe that neither Creed nor Hawk would hurt her. They’re good fucking men—men I’d trust with my life. But then, those men wouldn’t have kidnapped her. I think about how blindly we trusted Cooper, not seeing the changes in the man we once saw as a brother or father figure until it was too late.

I jump when there is a knock on the window. My situational awareness is fucked-up when I lose myself in work. One day, it will be my downfall, but that’s a problem for tomorrow. Right now, all that matters is Avery. I open my door wide when Greg moves back and get out of the car, not looking forward to this conversation.

“You found something. What is it? Is Avery okay?”

“I don’t know, but she better fucking be.”

“Explain,” Greg barks, crossing his arms as James stands beside me, watching me with curiosity in his eyes.

“I found Damon’s camera. It was in the air vent. I hacked the feed and watched what went down. I know who took Avery.”

“Who?” James asks when I pause.

“Creed and Hawk.”

Greg blows out a relieved breath, but James frowns, his eyes still on me.

“Fuck. Well, at least we know she’s safe. Where is she?”

I turn to look at Greg, whose face falls at my expression.

“You aren’t telling me everything, are you?”

I blow out a breath and try to keep my temper in check. “If you mean the fact that they broke into her room, drugged her, and kidnapped her while she was half-naked and unconscious, then you’re right. I didn’t tell you everything because if I hadn’t watched them with my own two eyes, I’m not sure I would’ve believed it myself.”

“You’re serious?”

I nod, and James curses.

“Holy fuck, what the hell do they think they are doing?”

“I don’t know, and frankly, I don’t care. This isn’t what we do. I don’t care who she is to them or what their feelings are.”

“You’re right. I can’t even imagine what she thought when she woke up. Especially after the way Hawk spoke to her.”

“You tell Zig and Oz yet?” James asks.

“No. I don’t want to sit around talking and making plans or give them the benefit of the doubt. They lied about not being finished with a job to pull this shit. Not fucking happening.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“The plan is we’re going to get Avery and bring her back to Apex, where I can find out exactly what those fuckers did and if she still wants our help.”

“Help with what?” James asks.

“Let’s just get Avery safe first. I’ll answer all your questions later.”

“Alright. You know where she is?”

“Yeah, about two hours from here. Are you both armed?”

“You don’t seriously think we’ll need to shoot them?” Greg asks in shock.

“At this point, Greg, I’m not ruling anything out.”

Chapter Fifteen

Avery

I don't know what I expected after our argument. Their anger, maybe. Or perhaps the cold shoulder. But they've thrown me completely by being very tactile instead. Small touches and brushes here and there that I had originally written off as accidental are now too frequent to be considered anything other than deliberate.

I keep moving away, but they keep following. The trouble is, there is nowhere for me to go. This place is so small that there is no reprieve, no place for me to escape to where I can just catch my freaking breath for a minute. Now, as the hours tick away and the night rolls in, I'm starting to feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin.

Being around them is a mindfuck. I never knew what it was like to both love and hate someone until they entered my life and tore it apart. Even now, sitting here with the scattered remnants of my sanity, I crave the feel of their arms around me. I used to relish the strength they would lend me, not realizing at the time that it was just a pretty lure to pull me in. When I cut them out, they took all their strength with them, leaving me feeling hollow and weak. And that just makes me hate them even more.

"You can't stay mad at us forever, Avery." Hawk sighs, sitting down beside me on the sofa.

"Sure, I can. And let's be honest, Hawk, you guys make it easy."

"I'm sorry. I've made a lot of mistakes."

"I'm the biggest one of all."

He yanks me into his lap, making me yelp.

"You were never a mistake."

I keep my emotions shut down so I don't have to feel the lie leaving his lips. It's something that took me years to perfect—something I became lax about when I was happy and in love. If I'd been masking back then, I would have never known the truth. We might still be together even if we were living a lie.

There is a reason some people give a dozen chances to people who don't deserve forgiveness. Often, the lie is sweeter than reality. Part of me will always wish I'd heard nothing and continued to live my lie, blissfully

unaware. That lie was wrapped so tightly around my happily ever after that when the truth broke free, it took with it my dreams for the future. I'm tempted to spill my guts and tell them everything, but I don't trust them not to throw it all back in my face.

I move to crawl off him, but he holds me tight.

"Tell me you don't want me anymore, Avery."

"I don't want you anymore."

He grins. "Liar." He yanks me closer and kisses me, holding me in place as he takes advantage of my shock and slips his tongue inside my mouth.

By the time I come to my senses, he's pulling away, placing a peck on the tip of my nose before pressing his forehead against mine.

"We can work through it all. Like you pointed out, we're not the same people we were before. This time, if you run, we'll chase you."

Hands on my shoulders make me jump as Creed leans over me.

"He's right, you know. A lot has changed since you've been gone, including us. We know what we want now. We know what it's like to live without you. Don't ask us to do that again, baby. We're just not that strong." His head dips as he presses a kiss to where my neck meets my shoulder. I shiver as his lips skate over the sensitive skin.

Hawk's hands tighten on my hips. With how I'm sitting, it's impossible not to feel how hard he is beneath me. I could give in, and God knows I want to. The pleasure they offer is almost worth the inevitable pain that comes afterward when everything comes crashing back down. But not this time.

"No." I shake my head and pull away. Even though it takes Hawk a second longer, he, too, releases me. The second he does, I scramble off his lap and climb off the sofa, knocking into Creed as I do.

"Easy, Avery. Nobody is going to push you into anything you don't want."

"Since when?" I look between the two of them, who don't even have the decency to look ashamed.

"Since we decided to keep you."

Have you ever experienced your temper going from zero to sixty in a second? Because that's what just happened to me. If I were a cartoon character, I'd have steam coming out of my ears.

"Fuck you both," I manage to spit out through gritted teeth.

Their expressions change from smug to wary. Creed approaches slowly, but I back up toward the front door.

“We’re just teasing you, Avery, but we’re not going to hide how we feel about you.”

“Why? It’s never been a problem before.”

“We never hid how we felt.” Creed frowns. He looks at Hawk, who shrugs, looking just as confused.

I laugh, and holy fuck, it sounds like I’m possessed. And it feels like it, too. Nasty, cruel words bubble up inside me, fighting to break free. I bite my tongue so hard that I can taste blood. “How can you say that when everything was a lie?”

“What are you talking about? When did we lie to you?”

Before I can answer, the front door slams open, making me spin around. Standing in the doorway with a gun pointed at Creed and Hawk is a very pissed-off-looking Evander.

“What the fuck, Evander?” Hawk roars.

Ev ignores them, his eyes moving to me, his expression softening as he looks me over and sees me looking mostly unharmed. “You okay?”

“You didn’t know they took me?” I whisper, needing to be sure because I have to trust someone. Only I can’t trust my instincts anymore.

“The second I found out, I came for you.”

“You came for me?” I choke out.

“You bet your ass I did.”

His words hit me hard enough to shock the breath from my lungs. My feet unfreeze, and before I stop to question my actions, I sprint toward him and jump into his arms, wrapping my own around his neck. I sense more people behind E, but I keep my eyes closed and press my face against his throat.

He came for me. When nobody else cared. He came for me. He didn’t give up or assume I’d run. I feel my tears fall as Hawk and Creed start yelling.

“Let go of my fucking wife, Evander, or I’ll kill you.”

“Fuck you, Creed. Seems to me your wife is exactly where she wants to be,” E snarls back. The mild-mannered man I know has been replaced with a pissed-off alpha.

“Evander,” Hawk warns as I lift my head, but whoever is behind us steps around and blocks my view. I realize one of them is Greg, but I don’t know who the other man is.

Both of them seem pissed, though. And something tells me that not all of us are coming out of this unscathed.

“Don’t get involved, Greg. This has nothing to do with you,” Hawk snaps as I look up at E.

Ev presses a kiss to my forehead, holding me against him for a minute longer before he eases me back to my feet. He takes my hand and holds it tightly as the guy I don’t know steps aside. Ev walks forward, taking me with him. The lines are drawn. Apex against Apex, and me the cause of it all. I never wanted this. But I have no idea how to stop everything from deteriorating further.

“I was involved the second you kidnapped Avery. What were you thinking?” Greg yells at them.

“Why do you care? Avery is nothing to you.” Creed steps forward, his eyes dropping to my hand in E’s. His body vibrates with anger.

I jolt at his words, but E holds my hand tightly, refusing to let me step back.

Creed takes in the action, his hands fisting at his side. “Something you want to tell us, *wife*?”

“You’re unbelievable.” The unknown man snorts.

“When I want your opinion, James, I’ll be sure to ask. But since you’re divorced, I doubt I’ll be coming to you for advice anytime soon.”

“Wow, you really are a dick.” The man I now know as James shakes his head.

“You’re the ones that stormed in here pointing a gun. Avery could have been hurt because of you.”

Everyone is silent for a second before E laughs. “You’re losing it, man. Are you even fucking listening to yourself? For a start, I would never hurt Avery. I’m not sure you can say the same.”

“We would never hurt her,” Hawk growls.

“You kidnapped her,” Evander says quietly, the soft tone having more impact than if he’d yelled.

“You broke into her room, drugged her, and took her while she was half-naked and vulnerable.”

They drugged me. I think I always knew, but I hoped—

“It wasn’t like that—” Creed starts, but I’m sick of listening to their excuses.

“Yes, it was,” I whisper, but they all hear me. I clear my throat and continue. “I woke up in a strange place in a T-shirt I know I didn’t put on with no idea where I was or who took me. Finding out it was you didn’t ease

my terror because you made it painfully clear how much you hate me.”

“We don’t hate you. Jesus.” Hawk runs his hands through his hair.

“Now, maybe. But you didn’t bring me here to love me. You brought me here for information because you think you deserve answers. The lack of clothing and shit was just one of your games to make me give in faster. Then you bring in the physical therapist you fucked so she can rub it in my face.”

“I told you, that was an accident.”

“How the fuck does an accident like that happen?” Greg hisses.

When they don’t answer, I continue. “Maybe somewhere along the way your feelings changed, but who’s to say they won’t change again? Fuck, you change your minds like I change my underwear. You say you want me. You want to what? Live happily ever after. You don’t even fucking know me. I’ve told you this, over and over, but you only hear what you want to. I don’t want this.”

Because none of it is real. It never was.

“Funny. You weren’t saying that when our dicks were inside you,” Hawk spits out.

E sucks in a sharp breath, my face flaming with humiliation.

“And there he is. The man who wields his words like weapons.”

I glance over at Creed, who looks sick.

“I woke up with you inside me. I was lost in the moment. I thought I was dreaming. It wouldn’t have been the first time. I didn’t fight either of you off, and yeah, I gave in to it all. Sue me. I haven’t had sex with anyone other than you two since I left, so it’s been a fucking while. Not that we can all say the same, huh? Our vows were always one-sided.”

“What does she mean?” Greg asks, cocking his head before shaking himself. “Right, the physical therapist. And she was just the one, right?” Greg mocks.

I talk over him, redirecting Creed and Hawk’s attention back to me. “I didn’t give you my consent,” I tell Creed honestly. His face pales even further. “But I didn’t blame you. I blamed myself. So, fuck you for saying that shit to me,” I snap at Hawk.

“Avery—” he starts, but I hold my hand up to stop him.

It’s time. I can’t do this anymore. “You want the truth? All the dark and dirty details I hid from you? Well, here it is. I hope you’re ready, because it’s a doozy of a story.”

“Hey, sweetheart, you don’t have to do this,” James tells me softly.

The compassion from a stranger threatens to bring me to my knees, but I hold it together. “It’s okay. It’s time. Maybe then we can all move on with our lives.” I look at Creed and squeeze Ev’s hand, needing him to help me through this.

“I fell in love with you the first time I met you. I never believed in love at first sight until then. I thought it was all a bunch of bullshit that belonged in the pages of a romance. Until I saw you. It was this perfect moment of clarity. I was meant to be yours. I just didn’t realize that you were never meant to be mine.”

“Avery.” Creed’s voice sounds tortured.

I ignore him and look at Hawk. “It was different with you. No fireworks, no instant connection. You made me nervous, but every time I was with you, you set off a kaleidoscope of butterflies in my stomach. You wore me down and wormed your way into my heart. You earned my love. In some way, that made what we had even more special than what I had with Creed. Not that you ever saw it. You were fine being in the background.”

I wipe a stray tear that slips free. “Everything was a whirlwind. I got so caught up in the fairy tale that I didn’t see the warning signs. Maybe I just didn’t want to see them. I got too comfortable, though, and let myself slip.”

“What do you mean, slip?” James asks gently.

I offer him a small smile before looking up at E, who looks down at me without judgment on his face. I hope he still looks at me that way when I’m finished explaining.

I turn back to Hawk and Creed, now standing side by side, creating a united front. Once upon a time, it was me that stood between them.

I shake my head and blow out a breath. “The day in the coffee shop, you helped me pick up all the papers I’d dropped. You helped me collect everything off the floor, remember?”

Creed gives a simple nod before crossing his arms.

“You asked me what I did, and I told you I worked with children. You never asked any questions about my work after that. I don’t know if it was because you didn’t have much interest in kids or if you just didn’t have much interest in me. But either way, I’d signed an NDA, so I couldn’t tell you more anyway. So, it worked in my favor. You couldn’t tell me the details about your job, and when you didn’t press for more about mine, I stopped worrying about it.”

“What’s your point? What does your job have to do with anything?”

Hawk asks.

“I worked for a department within the government that located missing people, specifically children. Trafficked children, to be precise.”

“Oh, Jesus, that had to be hard,” James murmurs.

I look at him and see recognition in his eyes. “Cop?”

“Once upon a time, yeah. How can you tell?”

“You have that look. The one that says you’ve seen the worst and often had your hands tied, stopping you from doing anything about it.”

He chuckles. “You nailed it.”

“Touching as this is, do you want to get to the point?” Hawk grunts out.

“I started as an intern but was hired full-time and worked in interrogation.”

“You interrogated a bunch of traumatized kids.” Hawk frowns.

Greg steps forward until his face is inches from Hawk’s. “I realize your default setting when you’re pissed is asshole, but talk to her in that tone again, and you’ll never get your fucking answers because I’ll put you down.”

Hawk grits his teeth but shuts up as Greg moves back to flank me.

“Carry on, Avery.”

I smile softly at him before taking a deep, steadying breath. “I talked to the children. I never interrogated them, but getting information was important to keeping them safe. I did interrogate the perpetrators, though, and I have no remorse over my actions.”

Hawk looks me up and down. “And how exactly did you get them to talk?” The innuendo is clear.

Creed whirls on him. “Enough!” Creed turns back to me and waits for my response.

“I just asked them questions.”

“They would’ve told you nothing but lies.”

“I know. But since I can tell when someone is lying, I’m the perfect person to interrogate them.”

“What, you read their body language?” Hawk chuckles.

I look up at Ev, who is still watching me.

“No. I mean, my gift allows me to tell when someone is lying. My skin hums with their deception.”

Ev skims his fingers down my jaw and nods. When I don’t see anything but understanding in his eyes, I almost burst into tears.

Turning back to Hawk and Creed, I can see I’ve shocked them into

silence.

“That’s how I knew Creed only married me for a green card to stay in the country.”

Greg curses as Ev goes rock-solid beside me.

“It’s also how I knew Hawk was lying when he told you he was in love with me, Creed. You both used me, and I was the fool who fell for it.”

“Not to be judgmental, but you were together for a while. How come you didn’t pick that up before?” James questions.

“I’d been working on blocking for years. Nobody wants someone around who can hear their lies, trust me. When my father told my mother he hadn’t been cheating on her, he lied, and he knew I knew about it. He put that on my shoulders and warned me that I’d tear the family apart if I opened my mouth. And that’s just one example. There are a thousand more. Blocking people was for my sanity as well as theirs. It took me a long time and a lot of focus, but I figured it out. There were times, though, when my guard slipped. Like when I was overly emotional. Sad, worried, angry.” I swallow. “Or blissfully happy.”

“It might have started out that way, Avery, but that changed—” Creed begins, but I shake my head.

“The day I found out, I was a wreck. I went for a drive to clear my head and figure out my next move. I was so upset that I almost totaled my car. I pulled over and just sat there, deciding what to do. I knew I should leave, but I couldn’t. I might not have been the love of your life, but you were mine. I was willing to pretend, hoping you’d grow to care for me.” I huff out a laugh.

“But you did leave. You didn’t give us a chance to fight for you. To prove we’d change,” Hawk growls.

“Sorry, Hawk, but I didn’t actually owe you anything. And I didn’t leave on purpose.”

I tug my hand free from Ev’s and rub my eyes, sore from crying. “A man found me on the side of the road. He calmed me down and listened to my story. I told him everything. Even what I could do. I talked to him until I fell asleep, and when I woke up, I was back in my hometown in a hospital.”

Hawk and Creed surge forward. “What happened? He hurt you?” They talk over each other.

“I was told I’d had a psychological break, and I’d been in the hospital for a week. Eventually, I returned to work, and they moved me to a new department. One that dealt with gifted people like me.”

“I don’t understand,” Ev says gently.

“Like Hawk, the people I worked with assumed I read people, and I was damn good at it. One of the best in the business. But thanks to the man who took me back, they knew the real reason I was so good at my job.”

“He told them what you could do? That motherfucker.”

“I didn’t know it was a bad thing at the time. I trusted my employers and the work we had done. We had saved so many kids. How could it be bad?”

“Fuck.” Hawk grips his hair as Ev squeezes my shoulder.

“We thought you ran.” Creed looks haunted.

“I had only my purse on me, that was it. You didn’t question why I’d leave everything else behind? You never even looked for me. You just thought I’d run. But I’d never do that.”

“Of course, they looked for you.” Greg sighs, but when he’s met with silence, he turns to Hawk and Creed.

“We thought she’d left us,” Creed says.

“Ev, tell me you looked into it.” Greg seems almost desperate now.

“I wasn’t with Apex then,” E reminds him gently.

“The man who you talked to”—James touches my arm lightly—“was his name Penn Travis?”

His question has the same effect as the oxygen being sucked out of the room.

“No. And I’d never spill my guts to a stranger.” I look around and see everyone’s confused faces. “I thought you knew.”

“Knew what?” Greg asks.

“That the man I talked to, the one who handed me over... It was Cooper.”

Chapter Sixteen

Hawk

I'm so fucking angry, I'm shaking with it. Every vile word I spewed made me want to rip out my own tongue, but I couldn't stop myself. I never can. People might say I'm a classic product of my childhood, the son of a man who was both verbally and emotionally abusive. I guess, in a way, they're right. I might never have lifted my hand to a woman or child, but my words might as well have been laced with poison with the amount of damage I've done. It's a knee-jerk reaction, making her want to hurt as much as me. I'm a fucking bully and exactly like the man I hate.

Still, nothing was breaking through the haze of anger, not with how at ease she was holding Ev's hand. She is giving him a piece of her that isn't hers to give. It's mine, dammit. All her pieces are mine and Creed's. I don't give a fuck if that makes me sound like a caveman. Nothing about this woman has me acting like anything other than a one-track-minded asshole.

Nothing until she mentioned Cooper. That snapped me out of my anger as the truth in her words began to bleed into my brain. Everything she's been trying to say, every reaction—it all makes sense now. All that poisonous hate aimed her way when I should have turned it inwards.

I pick up the chair closest to me and throw it across the room with a roar.

Voices start calling my name. I hear Avery crying, but I can't pull myself out of the need to destroy something, anything. Because if I stop for a second, I have to accept the fact that me and Creed were the ones to destroy our marriage. She was a victim in all this, and we made her out to be the villain. I can't even blame Cooper. We knew he'd betrayed us, so why didn't we look back at things and realize that he'd lied before that?

I pick up another chair and throw that, too, before I feel soft hands touch my arm. Avery's gentle voice has me pausing. Turning, I look down and see her gazing up at me, tears streaming down her face.

My chest is heaving, each tear leaving a wound on my soul.

She reaches up and cups my cheek. "That's enough."

"It's not. It will never be enough."

"It has to be. You have to let go of the things you can't change, or they'll eat you alive."

“How can you, of all people, say that after what we did?”

She offers me a sad smile as she drops her hand. “Because I have more life left to live. If I let myself drown in the past, I’ll miss out on what’s to come. I have to believe that everything I’ve been through helped shape me into the woman I’ve become. I was given those lessons, no matter how brutal some of them were, so I could learn from them. I’m stronger for it. I didn’t let life break me. I adapted.”

She steps back. I move with her, wanting to reach out and pull her to me. But she moves into Ev’s embrace, and some part of me already knows I’ve lost her.

“We need to talk. All of us, back at Apex. Cooper having a hand in all this changes things,” Greg says, watching me to make sure I don’t grab anything else.

“How? You knew he betrayed you. This can’t be a surprise, right?” James asks, looking at us. He didn’t know Cooper, so he only knows what we’ve told him. If nothing else, I’m thankful he didn’t have to experience that sense of betrayal that the man left us all with. And now, finding out his role in this just opens up old wounds that had barely begun to heal.

“Because we thought Cooper turned on us to save his dying wife. If this is true, then he turned on us long before then,” Creed answers as he sinks into the sofa, rubbing his hands over his face. “Cooper is dead Avery. So is Jan, I’m sorry, I know you loved them once.”

“They weren’t the people I thought they were,” she answers softly.

“He came to us,” I tell Avery, who looks at me in question. “Cooper. The day you left. He came to us late that night, telling us that he’d spoken to you. You’d told him that it was over between us. You wanted something more than a couple of retired SEALs who couldn’t let go of their glory years. He said he’d tried to talk you out of it, but you were adamant. You wanted out, and you told him to tell us to stay away, or you’d call the police and have us up on harassment charges. He told us to give you time to calm down. A week later, we noticed the money you took from our account and figured you had no intention of changing your mind.”

“Money? I didn’t take any money.”

I look at Creed, who just looks broken.

“Of course you didn’t,” I say, though I’m not so sure anymore.

“It’s true. Hell, I never even had your bank details. I had my own account. We never changed that after getting married. Sure, you might have

bought me things, but I never took cash from you or used your card.”

“Cooper could have easily taken it and drawn the money out. It would have added credibility to his story, which it obviously did,” James adds.

“We didn’t know. We thought…” My voice trails off, my excuse sounding weak even to my own ears.

Avery wraps her arms around herself.

“If you can hear lies, then know this. I’m sorry. Sorrier than you’ll ever know.”

She nods before E looks from me to Creed. I can tell, despite everything, he’s still pissed. Or maybe it’s because of everything. And though part of me wants to kill him for even touching Avery, another part of me recognizes that he’s doing what we all failed to do. Take care of her. Put her needs above all else. Even men considered brothers. If we hadn’t taken Cooper’s words as gospel, things might have played out very differently.

“I’ll take Avery back. She can decide what she wants to do from there, and you will abide by whatever she says.”

I grit my teeth but nod. I can give her that, at least.

“I’d like to talk things through. I know you don’t owe us anything, but I think we should clear the air. There are things we should know and things we need to tell you too,” Creed tells Avery, who looks at Ev before biting her lip.

“Just give her some space for now, okay?” Greg offers before turning to Avery. “Go grab your things.”

She dips her head, and I can feel the embarrassment coming off her in waves. “I don’t have anything to bring. Can we just go?” She looks at Ev, who frowns before looking at Creed.

“What did you do with the stuff from her room?”

“I’ll get it.”

Ev huffs before shaking his head. “You kept her things from her? Really? I thought we went over this shit with Slade and Jagger.”

Nothing we say now will make us look like anything less than the dicks they all think we are, so I keep my mouth shut. Creed must be thinking along the same lines because he keeps quiet too.

“Fuck this. I’m taking Avery home. Bring her things when you have them,” Ev tells Greg before looking at Avery. “You have shoes, sweetheart, or do you need me to carry you?”

Thank fuck, we gave her the sneakers. I’d hate to have to break my friend’s arms.

“I have shoes. Give me a second.”

She moves over to the door where her sneakers sit and slides them on as E crosses his arms over his chest, daring me to stop him.

“Just remember, Ev, she’s not yours,” I tell him quietly so Avery doesn’t hear him.

“Newsflash, asshole. She isn’t yours either.”

He steps back and offers Avery his hand. She doesn’t hesitate to take it. With one quick look behind her, she’s out the door, oblivious to the devastation she’s leaving behind.

“You stupid fucks.” Greg seethes as James picks up one of the chairs I tossed earlier.

“Save it, Greg. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Oh, you’re gonna listen, boy. Because someone has to get through that thick skull of yours.”

I move over to where Creed is and sit down beside him.

Greg walks over and stands in front of us. I almost smirk, feeling like I’ve been sent to the principal’s office. But there is nothing funny about this situation.

“We didn’t push you after Avery left because you made it really fucking clear you wouldn’t listen. Not forcing the issue is on us—on me. I should have made you talk. Even without Coop’s involvement, I could have told you that shit was out of character for Avery. How can I know that and not you?”

“Have you ever had something so good you just knew you didn’t deserve it? I knew she’d eventually figure out that she could do better and leave,” Creed answers.

“I’m starting to think you knew nothing about your wife.” He sits down on the coffee table and sighs. “You fucked up bad this time, guys. I hate to say it, but this stunt might just be the match that burns the bridge.”

“She still loves us. It’s in there. I’ve seen it.”

It’s why she’s holding back. She’s scared. I just didn’t know why.

“This isn’t a fairy tale. Love doesn’t fix everything. More often than not, love alone is not enough. Ask yourself this. What did she get out of a relationship with you that she couldn’t find somewhere else?” He pauses, giving us a moment to think about that before he continues. “You’re right about something, though. She does deserve better. And better just walked out that door with his hand wrapped around hers.”

I open my mouth to deny it, but Greg shakes his head. “I warned him off.

I could see him falling, and I told him to back away. But now I'm not sure what to think. Given a shot, they could make each other really happy. Why the fuck should I advocate for this toxic bullshit between you?"

"I love her," I tell him. "And I know you said it's not enough, but it has to be. Otherwise, what's the fucking point in any of this?"

"Do you, though, Hawk? Love her, that is? Because she seems to think otherwise."

I laugh and lean back, my eyes taking in the wooden beams that stretch across the ceiling. "I didn't know how I felt about her until she was gone. What did I know about love? It's only from watching others that I figured it out."

"God, this is such a fucking mess. It wasn't supposed to go down this way." Creed gets to his feet and starts pacing.

"Neither of you knew she was gifted?" James asks, walking over and sitting on the arm of the chair.

"No. It's not an obvious gift like Salem's, though, is it? I can't believe she didn't tell us." Creed grunts.

"Why would she? She mentioned how it had fucked up her childhood. Maybe she just wanted to be normal. I hate that she didn't trust us enough to tell us, but I can understand why. And she was right not to trust us. We used her, manipulated her, and then, at the first sign of trouble, we gave up on her."

"I'll be honest, I know next to nothing about what went down. All I know is you have an ex-wife that bailed. And somehow, I'm going to find myself in a situation where I'm dying and she tries to save me." James grins, though it's forced.

"Oh fuck, sorry, man. I forgot," Greg apologizes.

He waves it off. "I just need a rough idea of the full story because it might be relevant later on. I'd keep my nose out if it weren't literally life or death."

Creed sits down and starts the story over, where he bumps into her at a coffee shop and asks her out on a date, and I pick up from there.

"He brought her to a bar where I was waiting for them. We pretended it was a coincidence that I was there. And when Creed asked if I wanted to join them, Avery didn't protest. We spent some time getting to know each other, and I'll admit, by the end of the night, I could see why Creed liked her so much. When we told her how we were looking for a slightly different kind of relationship, she was shocked."

“She looked like a cartoon character, her eyes were so wide.” Creed laughs. “But she agreed to give it a try, and it progressed from there.”

James crosses his legs. “Explain the green card thing.”

“I’m Canadian. I spent a large chunk of my time in the States as a kid because my mother married an American soldier and relocated. I spent more time here than I did back home. When my stepfather died, my mom kind of lost it. Bouncing from one guy to the next, and each was as bad as the other. I started acting out and ended up getting into trouble. The usual teen stuff to start with: vandalism, trespassing, drunk and disorderly. I was an asshole, but I skated under the radar until I got caught stealing a car.

“The judge had been friends with my stepdad. He cut me a deal. I’d have a record, but I wouldn’t serve time as long as I enlisted. And I did. That’s where my path crossed with Hawk and the others. Did thirteen years before I took a bullet and blew out my knee. I was given a medical discharge and sent home. It took over a year of PT to walk again, but I did it, and during that time I met Gramps. He offered me a job, and I said yes. I was on a mission when Luna inherited Apex. When I returned, it was to find a letter from immigration. I was being deported. I tried to fight it. The problem was, I couldn’t get a green card to stay in the States because of my record, even though I had served honorably in the US military. That left marrying someone. To be honest, I didn’t think that would work either, but it was my last shot.”

“Did you really just want a date when you met Avery that day? Or did you see a green card when you helped her?” Greg asks quietly.

“I really did like her, but...” He sighs in defeat. “Yeah. She was young, innocent, and easily impressed. She was perfect.”

“You didn’t mention the green card thing to her at all, did you?” James shakes his head.

“I didn’t want her to think that was my only reason for popping the question after just six weeks. I mean, sure, it was a part of it, but I’d already started falling for her by then. And the fact that she was willing to be shared with Hawk... Man, I felt like all the stars had aligned or some shit.

“I told her after we were married. I remembered playing dumb, that I’d been in the States so long I forgot that was even an issue.

“We’d flipped a coin, knowing how it would turn out. Made it funny. Legally, I was the one who had to marry her for obvious reasons, but she didn’t know that then. She thought it was all by chance—married to me, first

baby with Hawk. We had an official ceremony and then a second one with Hawk, too, and she took both our names and wore both our rings. She bought it because she loved us.” Creed’s voice cracks. “And even after, when she had to be interviewed by immigration, she was oblivious. She trusted us, and that was the end of it.”

I speak up. “The day she left, Creed and I were arguing in the kitchen.” I imagine Avery standing on the other side of the door with tears running down her face as the truth spilled out.

“I got a letter from immigration a few weeks after our second anniversary saying I’d been granted permanent citizenship.” Creed rubs his face.

I swallow, remembering the rings she still carried around on a chain in her bag. Rings I felt so uncomfortable giving her, even though I’d do anything for Creed. Hell, I would’ve married him myself if that was the only option left.

“She heard you,” Greg concludes.

“We didn’t know then, but yeah, she must have. It didn’t matter to me why we married Avery. I was happy and in love with her. I didn’t want to rock the boat. Hawk wanted to come clean.”

“I knew if she found out later that we only dated her to get Creed his green card, she’d be hurt.”

Greg studies me. “But that wasn’t all of it.”

Creed looks at me and frowns.

“Creed had his green card. He didn’t need to stay married to Avery anymore. Neither of us did. I felt like shit for how it all played out, and she started talking about trying for a family and was I ready to be a dad, and it was all just too much.”

“I was so pissed at you. I asked you why the fuck you’d want to leave her when we had everything we wanted. I asked you if you loved her.”

I bow my head.

“You told him no,” James surmises, but I shake my head.

“Worse. I said yes. Of course, I love her.”

Greg groans. “And she knew it was a lie.”

“It wasn’t, but I didn’t know it then. I was so twisted with guilt. I didn’t know how I felt until it was too late.”

“God, when you guys fuck up, you really go all out.” James stands up. “What are you going to do now?”

“Tell her the truth. All of it. She deserves to know.”

“And if she still wants nothing to do with you?” Greg asks softly.

“Then we’ll do what we should have done from the beginning. We’ll fight for her. Beg on our fucking knees for forgiveness if we have to. But we won’t give up without a fight.”

And something tells me it’s going to be a battle beyond anything we’ve seen before.

Chapter Seventeen

Avery

Evander kept hold of my hand the whole way back to the car. He walked slightly in front of me, moving branches aside so I didn't get scratched, quietly guiding me around roots and rocks that might trip me.

His words were soft and few, like he could sense that I might fall apart at any minute, and my hand in his was the only thing keeping me grounded. When we made it to his truck, he helped me into the front seat before doing up my seatbelt for me.

I rest my head against the cool glass of the window and gave in to the exhaustion. I miss the whole car ride back, only stirring when I could feel arms sliding underneath me and lifting me up.

I crack my eyes open and tip my head up. "Ev?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"Thank you," I mumble before burrowing my head under his chin, not caring when the stubble on his jaw scratches my forehead.

I feel myself being lowered onto a bed before my sneakers are slid off my feet and a soft blanket is tucked around me.

"Sleep now. I've got you." Lips press against my forehead for a moment before sleep claims me once more.

Banging wakes me with a jolt after what feels like minutes later. I bolt upright, my heart beating out of my chest as I shake off the remnants of a dream in which I was running through the woods, branches grabbing me like hands.

I spot Evander waking in a chair at the end of the bed before more banging sounds through the room. The noise snaps Ev out of his sleepy haze. He looks at me for a second before standing and stretching.

"Stay here, Avery. I've got this."

I nod, tugging the blanket up to my chin. Evander walks out of the room, determination in every inch of his stride.

I swallow as I take in the room from my spot in the center of the large bed. The chair E just vacated is at the foot of the bed, and the wall behind it is lined with bookcases filled with books. A lamp sits near the window with a small table beside it. A book rests on top with a glass beside it, making me

think that's where the chair must have been dragged from. I could easily picture myself curled up in that very spot, reading.

On either side of the bed is a nightstand with antique bronze lamps matching the floor lamp near the window. On the wall to my left is a long dresser with doors on either side where the closet and bathroom must be, but I ignore those for now when I hear yelling coming from the other room.

Concerned about what I might be walking in on but more worried about leaving Ev to face the firing squad alone, I climb from the bed and walk on shaky legs out of the room. There's a short hallway with two doors on my left and a large glass door on my right, which leads outside. The warm sun bathes my face as I walk slowly toward the closed door at the end of the hallway.

Blowing out a steadying breath, I turn the knob and walk into the brightly lit living area. My legs shake when I see the familiar faces of Oz and Zig. Just behind them, I spot Wilder and Slade.

My feet feel glued to the floor as I consider my next move. But as I stand here, Zig looks up and spots me.

"Avery."

Everyone stops to look at me.

Ev turns and hurries my way, wrapping his arm around my shoulder and turning me into him. "You okay? I told you I could handle these guys. You don't need this crap already," he murmurs into my hair.

"I'm not leaving you to deal with it alone. You did nothing wrong."

"Neither did you. Remember that. And don't let any of these assholes push you around, okay?"

I grin against his shoulder. "Okay."

He tugs me toward the others, who have fanned out now. I wish I was wearing more than shorts and a T-shirt, but over the last few days, I've learned to be grateful for what I do have. It would have been a lot fucking worse to be standing here in just a T-shirt and my panties.

"Hi." I wave lamely when I get close.

They all take me in. And though I can feel my cheeks heat, I don't hide in Ev's chest like I want to. After everything I've been through lately, I refuse to be intimidated by them.

"Heard you were back," Oz states, crossing his arms.

I just nod because what do I say?

"The question is, why?" Slade throws out.

I open my mouth to reply, but Ev squeezes my hand.

“No. You don’t get to come banging on my door at the crack of dawn and start firing your questions.”

“Evander,” Zig starts, but Ev steps forward and nudges me to stand behind him.

Good God, this man. I didn’t think they truly existed. He owes me nothing, and yet, in the little time that I’ve known him, he’s made me feel safer and more protected than I’ve ever felt before.

“Look, a lot has happened. I get that,” Wilder starts. “But, Avery, even you can admit that the last time you were here, you left things... fucked up. We’re just trying to minimize the fallout. We can’t afford for Creed and Hawk to lose their heads right now.”

His words shouldn’t hurt, but they do. “I didn’t fuck things up,” I whisper.

“You absolutely did, even if it wasn’t on purpose,” Oz snaps, making Ev growl.

“For fuck’s sake, Ev, you weren’t here. You don’t know her like we do,” Slade fires back.

“Seems to me that I might be the only one who does know her. You’ve pulled some shit over the years, some of it sketchy as fuck, especially when it came to Salem and Astrid. And I always made excuses for you. But I’m done. You don’t come into my fucking home hoping to intimidate Avery so that she’ll bend to your will. You pull that again, and she’s gone, and I’m gone with her.”

“Come on, Ev, you have no idea what you stepped into the middle of. We loved Avery like family once, and she shit all over it. You think she won’t do the same to you?” Slade huffs.

“Not to mention she’s fucking married to your brothers. Or did you forget that?” Oz adds sternly.

The door swings open, allowing more bodies to enter. I move around Ev and step in front of him, trying to block his bigger body with mine. They might hate me, but I know they’ll never hurt a woman. I can’t guarantee they won’t start swinging at Ev, though, and I refuse to let him get hurt because of me.

When I see Greg pushing through the group, I let out a relieved breath until I spot Hawk and Creed behind him. They stop next to the others, but Greg keeps walking until he is right in front of me.

He slides a finger under my chin and tips my head back. “You okay?”

I offer him a weak smile. "Peachy."

"Brave as fuck, just like always." He winks at me before looking up at Ev.

"What about you? You good?"

"Fuck no."

"Yeah, I don't imagine you are. Well, let's change that, shall we?"

Greg turns and stands next to Ev, lending us his support. I feel tears prick my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall.

"Greg, you do not want to get involved in this," Oz warns him.

"I am involved. We're a family, right?"

Nobody says anything to that. They eye Hawk and Creed, who are staring at me and the stance I've taken in front of Evander.

"Let me start by asking what the fuck this early morning intervention is all about."

Zig crosses his arms. "I would've thought that was obvious. Seems a lot has happened over the last few days, and nobody has told us fuck-all about it. Imagine my surprise when I'm reviewing the security footage from last night and see Evander carrying Avery like she's his fucking bride or something. Only that can't be right because she's married to these two the last time I checked. You said she was missing. She doesn't seem to be fucking missing. Now explain what the fuck is going on."

"We took her." Hawk steps forward, his eyes on me.

I lean back into Ev, not realizing I'm doing it until Hawk stops.

"What do you mean you took her?" Wilder looks from Hawk to me with a frown.

My heart rate picks up again, knowing this is going to go bad quickly. "I'll just leave you to talk."

"Stay," Oz barks, making me narrow my eyes on him.

"I'm not a fucking dog, Oz, but honestly, I'm so uncomfortable right now, I'm scared I'll puke all over you."

Slade rolls his eyes. "If you were afraid of us, you wouldn't have stepped in front of Ev."

"Are you serious?" Ev snarls. "You think she's not scared because she stepped in front of me? She's shaking like a fucking leaf, but she stepped in front of me because she thinks you're less likely to hurt her than you are me right now."

Exactly. How does he read me so well? I feel Hawk's eyes on me and

know he's wondering the same thing.

"She stepped in front of a bullet aimed at Creed. She is used to putting her safety on the line for others," Greg says.

"We're fucking family," Zig barks. "No matter what, we don't hurt our family."

"I don't think family means what you think it does."

"And what would you know?" Oz snaps before wincing. "Shit, sorry."

I shrug. "You kind of just proved my point. You once told me that I was family. But I didn't realize there were strings attached."

The room is silent as I take a deep breath. Ev gives my hips a squeeze in support. "I'm not going to stand here while you go over the same shit I've had to live with for the last few years. You want to witness the car crash? Go for it. But that car crash was my fucking life, and where were you all? You said we were family, but you didn't say we were family as long as I was with Hawk and Creed. I should have known that, but I was just so excited to be getting a bunch of big brothers. I should have read the small print," I huff.

"You left, Avery. You didn't just leave Hawk and Creed, you left all of us too," Wilder says, his eyes wide.

"I would never have left you," I whisper, my world bleeding with pain. "I would've settled for the scraps Hawk and Creed fed me if it meant keeping you all. I loved you all so much, but you never loved me the same."

"We—" I shake my head when Oz starts to speak.

"You never looked for me. You never wondered what could have happened that was so bad that I'd leave this all behind, which is a non-issue because I didn't leave on purpose. You never cared enough to find me, hold me, tell me that it didn't matter if me, Hawk, and Creed went up in flames because you would all still love me unconditionally."

"You can't just blame us, Avery. A phone works two ways. Not once did you try to call us. To let us know you were okay or not. You say you love us, but you gave up on us too," Crew says.

I look at him, wanting to argue, but he's right. I could have called them. I could have let them know what happened. The truth is, I was afraid, and it was easier to be mad and blame them.

Ev turns me in his arms and peers down at me, ignoring everyone else in the room. "You want me to take you out of here? I will. Just say the word. You want to head back to the bedroom and let me deal with this? I can do that too. You're the one calling the shots."

I close my eyes and breathe him in, letting his smell comfort me. “I want to take a shower. I want to put on something clean, something other than a freaking T-shirt and shorts. I just want a minute to myself before we move on to the next drama. And I want a phone so I can make a call. It’s really important I make that call, Ev.”

He looks at me, even though people are arguing behind us. “I’ll make it happen. There’s a bathroom just off the bedroom. Go take a shower or, better yet, a bath. Take whatever of mine you want from the dresser, and I’ll get your things back. And if they refuse, we’ll just order you new stuff online. We’ll do the phone call after. I’ll set you up with a phone that can’t be traced back to here.”

“Thank you.” The gratitude I feel for this man is staggering.

“You don’t need to thank me, Avery. It’s my pleasure.”

He kisses my forehead again before nodding for me to leave. I’m almost to the door when Creed calls my name. I hesitate before turning around.

“We need to talk. This isn’t over.”

I shake my head. “It was over the second you believed I walked away.”

Chapter Eighteen

Creed

Nobody speaks until she closes the door.

“Will someone tell me what the fuck is going on?” Oz snaps.

“In a minute. What I’d like to know is, why you think coming here like this was okay? That woman has been through hell and back, and you all come in here with your accusations? I swear, I don’t know any of you anymore.” Evander shakes his head in disbelief.

“Ev—” Wilder starts, but Greg interrupts.

“No. He’s right. When are we going to learn our lessons? Did you hear what she said? Even if she hurt your feelings and left without saying goodbye, she still saved Creed. Yet none of you came to the hospital, apart from me and Ev—and no, I’m not counting Hawk and Creed because I wish they hadn’t come.”

“I’m so fucking confused right now.” Slade sighs.

“Yeah? Imagine how Avery feels,” Ev tosses in, not giving anyone an inch.

I jump in. “We were pissed at Avery for coming back and not giving us any answers as to why she left in the first place.” Might as well face the firing squad now.

Zig stops me. “Hold on. Do we need to call the whole group?”

I look at Hawk, who shrugs. “Might as well get everything out in the open.”

“Alright. Let’s head to the main house. I’ll call the others,” Zig orders, and everyone begins to leave.

I stay where I am, and so do Hawk and Greg, while Evander walks into the kitchen and starts slamming drawers.

“You coming?”

“I’m leaving a note for Avery so she knows where I am.”

Hawk snorts, but I elbow him. Hawk might not see what’s developing between Evander and Avery, but I do. And if we keep acting like this, we’ll push her right into Evander’s arms.

“I’m sure she’ll figure it out,” Hawk says.

“Assuming shit is what got you into this mess to begin with,” Greg states,

cocking his brow with a dare for Hawk to argue.

He blows out a breath. "I deserved that."

We wait while Evander writes his note and slips on his boots. "Let's go." He walks to the door and holds it open for us to leave. Once we do, he turns and locks the door behind him.

"You're locking her in?" I frown.

"No. I'm locking you out. I told her where the spare key is in my note." And with that, he walks up to the main house, leaving the rest of us behind.

"I don't think I've ever seen Ev this pissed." Greg whistles.

"Jealousy makes smart people act stupid."

"The way I see it, that boy has nothing to be jealous of. Right now, he's the one with the girl and her trust. What do you have?" With that parting shot, Greg walks away, leaving me and Hawk to look at each other.

"When we fuck up, we really fuck up." Hawk sighs.

"It was my fault. It was my idea."

He laughs. "Sure, I can blame you. But when you said 'kidnap' and I said 'okay' instead of 'what the fuck,' I became as responsible as you."

I shake my head. "Except it's always my ideas that bite us in the ass. It was my idea to marry Avery for a green card, remember?"

"Doesn't matter what your reasons were. Mine either. She was still the best thing that ever happened to us. And if you hadn't needed a wife, we would've missed out."

"Even after all this?"

"We still have a shot at fixing shit. It might be small, but it's there. I know she's mad and hurt, and she has a right to be. But tell me you didn't see the love in her eyes when you were inside her."

I think back to the night in the cabin. For a second, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. She responded so beautifully, just like she always did. And because she was still sleepy, she was too out of it to remember she was mad at us. I missed how good we were together.

"I can't believe you slept with Jess. That's going to make everything ten times harder," I warn him. I'm not so pissed anymore, just disappointed.

"Like I said, I thought Avery was gone for good. The twisted thing is, I slept with Jess because she reminded me of Avery. I thought I could fuck her out of my system, but all it did was make me realize that nobody but Avery would do. Everyone else was just a poor imitation."

I reach for the double doors to open them but stop. "Evander's going to

be a problem.”

“Yep. We’ll add it to the list of things we need to figure out. But right now, we need to spill everything we know and hope they don’t beat the shit out of us.”

“Funny, I think it might make me feel better,” I admit before pulling the door wide and walking inside.

It’s noisy, with everyone talking over one another as they sit around the dining table. It quiets down when Hawk and I take our seats. I look around when I don’t see the girls.

“James’s taken them down to the range for some target practice. I thought we’d be safer discussing this without them around,” Oz admits.

Greg laughs tightly. “Yeah, because they’d be pissed with you all.”

“Alright, let’s get this started. Creed, you’re up.”

I lean back and launch into my story about how I thought it would be a good idea to take Avery to the cabin with Hawk until she admitted why she left and how it seemed like a good idea at the time for me and Hawk to get closure.

“I don’t understand why she would go with you. From what Greg said, you were dicks to her at the hospital, especially Hawk.”

“Oh, it gets better,” Greg mutters. I glare at the asshole who is not helping.

“She used to take these pills to help when she flew. She hated planes. So, she’d pop a couple before take-off and wake up when she’d landed. We knew she was safe taking them, so…” I let my voice drift off as they put the pieces together.

Jagger jumps up from his seat. “You drugged her?”

“We didn’t hurt her,” Hawk reiterates.

“Oh, you fucking did,” he argues.

“Do you have any idea how fucking traumatizing that must have been?” Zig curses.

I run my hands through my hair. “We fucked up, I know. We thought she came for more money and to stir up trouble. We wanted answers without getting any of you involved, but we forgot what it was like.”

“What what was it like?” Slade frowns

“Being in Avery’s orbit,” Hawk finishes for me.

“Wait…” Crew looks between me and Hawk before erupting into fits of laughter. “Are you saying you talked smack to this woman, drugged her,

kidnapped her—”

“Don’t forget, kept her clothes and belongings from her. Seems to be the thing to do with you idiots,” Greg adds. Hawk, Jagger, and Slade all flip him off.

“And now you want to flip the script and woo her?” Crew continues.

“Not woo. How do you woo your wife?” Hawk huffs.

“If you have to ask that, then no wonder she left.” Jagger shakes his head.

“She didn’t leave on purpose,” Hawk snaps, running his fingers through his hair.

“We thought she’d woken up and left us. Emptied one of our bank accounts and ran. We didn’t hear a peep from her until the day in the diner. Cooper told us she’d spoken to him. Told him she wasn’t coming back, and he urged us to stay away.”

“What the fuck does Cooper have to do with any of this? It’s not a surprise that he would tell you to stay away, though. He was always protective of Avery.” Oz tips his head in thought.

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s why she trusted him right back,” I snarl.

I attempt to explain the rest, but Evander interrupts me.

“When I went to the hospital to talk to Avery, she told me where she worked and what she does,” he starts. I listen to him explain Avery’s job and how she helped trafficked victims, picking up the details I’d missed last night.

“What I didn’t know was that Avery is gifted too,” Evander tells everyone. I would argue that it’s not his secret to tell, but I don’t think I have a leg to stand on right now.

“What do you mean, she’s gifted?”

“I mean, she’s a walking, talking human lie detector.”

“Impossible,” Zig states.

We all look at him. His missus can heal people, and Astrid can see a person’s death before it happens, but he thinks this is impossible?

“No. I mean, impossible that she wouldn’t have told us. Why hide it?”

“Because she wanted to belong. She wanted that family you dangled in front of her like a carrot. Her family was shit, and it messed her up,” Ev answers.

“Shit how? She never said anything other than they were dead.” Zig looks at me.

I open my mouth before snapping it shut again.

Zig huffs when I don't answer.

"Hawk?"

"I don't know. She just said they'd died when she was a kid. I didn't want to upset her, so I didn't push for more."

I don't like the looks I'm getting, but I can't say they're not justified.

"Mom was a famous ballerina. Dad was a world-renowned choreographer," Evander chimes in, making my head snap in his direction.

"A man broke into their family home when Avery was at a friend's house. He raped the mother and broke both her legs. Avery found her when she came home early that night because she wasn't feeling well."

"Jesus, how the fuck do you know this?"

"It's my job. Anyway, the dad was found at his mistress's house. There was a big media scandal about it. Mom's ballet career was over. She was confined to a wheelchair and—from what I could find—heavily medicated for both pain and depression. The needier she got, the more time her dad spent with other women, leaving Avery to deal with the fallout.

"A year to the day of the original attack, neighbors reported hearing screams coming from the house just before lunchtime. By the time the cops got there, both mom and dad were dead in what they initially thought was a murder-suicide. The gun used had mom's prints all over it."

The silence is so thick you could cut it with a knife.

"They figured out quickly that it was staged."

"So, someone killed them. The mistress?" Crew asks.

"Cops figured mom had a stalker. Found emails going back years. Nobody was ever arrested. When no one came forward to take Avery in, the police decided it would be best to put her in witness protection just in case. Give her a new name and relocate her."

"So, she lost her mom, dad, and everything she knew, all in one fell swoop?" Slade chokes.

Ev nods. "I had to break some sealed files to find this out, but yeah. She would have been told not to talk about it. She is, for all intents and purposes, now Avery Clancy. Or she was until she got married. She didn't hide who she was out of spite, but safety."

Ev looks at me, but I wave him off, still in shock. "I can't even... I don't know what to say. Wait, she said she was in foster care. Why didn't she end up with a family? Surely, she would have been a priority for fostering."

"The agency thought it would be safer for her to get lost in the system.

They kept tabs on her, but they made sure she was never fostered, which wasn't hard. Nobody knew who she was, and all they saw was a kid scared of shadows who screamed herself to sleep every night. I've read the case file. It's not an easy read."

Everyone is quiet for a second. I look at Hawk, who looks as sick as I feel.

"This is the part I find interesting. Avery told me she was recruited for an internship in some sort of mentoring program right out of the group home she was living in. This was the same day she turned eighteen. They offered her a job, health insurance, and a small apartment, free and clear, as long as she stayed with the company for a minimum of four years. As she doesn't get her inheritance from her parents until she turns thirty, she agreed."

"I don't blame her. Most kids in the system are usually forgotten about when they turn eighteen, which is scary as hell. I would've taken the deal too," Greg admits.

"Except what are the odds that a gifted girl ends up right in the hands of the government chasing them?" Ev asks.

"I thought you said she worked in the missing persons and trafficking department."

"She did." Ev looks at me. "Tell them what happened the day she left."

I look down at the table. "Apparently, she heard me and Hawk arguing. We didn't know she was there, and we sure as shit didn't know she could hear lies, not that it's an excuse." I rub the back of my neck. "She found out that I married her to secure my green card and that Hawk didn't actually love her."

"I didn't know I did at the time, but I do love her," Hawk amends quickly, but if the looks we're getting are anything to go by, it's not making much difference.

"What a clusterfuck," Oz groans. "No wonder she left."

"She didn't, though. She took her keys and drove around while she was upset, but she had decided to come back." I choke on the next part, so I clear my throat before carrying on. "She decided that she'd rather be with us than be without us, even if it was an act," I whisper, looking up and expecting judgment but only finding sadness. "And then Cooper found her."

"Explain his involvement here. I know he cared for her, so asking to give her space makes sense. What doesn't make sense is why he never mentioned seeing her again afterward? He and Kay were like adoptive parents to her. I

never understood how he just let her walk away any more than I understood you two doing it,” Jagger admits.

I look at him, but he just shrugs. “I’d move heaven and earth for Astrid. She ran, and I was right behind her. It wouldn’t matter to me how many times she took off. I’d hunt her down each and every time. You guys just let Avery go.”

“We were hurt. It’s not an excuse, but with the money gone, we figured she got what she wanted. The problem is, she never took the money. She pointed out that she never had access to our bank accounts.”

“Wait, wouldn’t immigration have looked into things like that? Joint accounts and the same address, shit like that?” Crew frowns.

I look at Hawk, who takes over. “We do have a joint account. We added Avery to it to sell the story, but she didn’t have access to it. She never even asked about it. It’s irrelevant anyway, because if we’d used our brains, we would’ve realized the money was taken from my personal account, not the joint one.”

“So, who took it?”

“Cooper,” Ev answers. “I looked into it last night. The money was withdrawn from Hawk’s account in cash, but a few months later, regular large cash amounts were deposited into Kay’s bank account. She didn’t work, and the money didn’t come from Cooper’s account.”

“Why, though? What the fuck was Cooper thinking?”

“Avery told him what she could do, and a week later, she woke up in a hospital. She was told she had had a mental break, and when she went back to work, she was offered a new job in a different department.”

“But Cooper sold us out to save Kay. If this were true, he would’ve already known about gifted people. I don’t understand. Wait, you said she was recruited, so they already knew what she could do, right?” Slade jumps from one thing to another.

Ev rubs his hand over his face. “No. They thought she was skilled at reading people. They paid for her degree to study human behavior, but they didn’t know she was gifted, not until Cooper told them.”

Chapter Nineteen

Avery

I took Ev's advice and soaked in the tub. It went a long way toward working out some of the stress I'd been feeling since the second I heard the banging on the door.

After climbing out and drying off, I rummage through Evander's drawers and pull out a pair of black boxers and a white T-shirt. Another day, another T-shirt. But this one doesn't piss me off like the others did, and it smells like E, which is a bonus.

I find a comb, which I use to brush my hair before braiding it, and an unopened toothbrush under the counter in the bathroom that I claim. I don't think Ev would mind, and if he did, I'd replace it.

Once done, I wander around the main part of the house, which is light and welcoming now that the grumpy thunderclouds from before are gone. Light oak floors, warm cream walls, and huge windows with white shutters give the place a Mediterranean vibe. With the sun pouring in, I could shut my eyes and almost picture myself sitting in some Greek villa rather than coming back home to the scene of my heartbreak. Of course, these houses weren't here last time I was. Ev had mentioned that Apex had added homes to the sprawling property, which meant most of the guys lived onsite—except Nash and Hendrix, who, as far as I knew, were still stationed abroad somewhere.

The kitchen is glossy white and minimalistic, but I don't take much of it in when I spot the fancy coffee machine.

"Ah, my precious." I search the cupboards until I find the mugs and coffee and make myself a cup.

As it brews, I walk over to the island, pulling out one of the stools to sit, when I spot a note.

Avery,

I'm over at the main house giving the guys a rundown of everything. I know they'll have questions, but they can wait until you're ready. Relax. Help yourself to anything you want. I've locked the doors so nobody can bother you. There is a spare key in the kitchen drawer, the third one down. I'll try to be as quick as I can, then we can sort out that phone call for you.

Evander

I smile as I trace my fingers over the letters before reality steps in. Ev is somewhat of a conundrum for me. There is something about the man that draws me in. There has been since the first time I saw him in the hospital.

Then, for him to not just stand up for me against his family but to put himself between me and them, that's more than I ever expected. I've never had that before. Not even with Hawk and Creed.

With a sigh, I walk back over to the coffee machine as it beeps and pour myself a cup before carrying it over to one of the two light gray oversized sofas. I curl up in the corner and hold the mug with both hands as I try to untangle everything.

Everything would be so much easier if I just hated Hawk and Creed. Oh, there is a part of me that is so fucking angry that it makes it hard to think about them without wanting to inflict bodily harm. But there is a part of me—that young, naive girl—that still loves the men I fell so head over heels in love with. People say you never forget your first love, even if, in the end, it turns bad. And that's because the first touch of love leaves an imprint on your soul. Every relationship that comes after will be compared to that one. The good, the bad, and the downright ugly. And I fear I'll always hold myself back with anyone else because of the damage they inflicted.

All those that say it's better to have loved and lost than never have loved at all have never had their still-beating hearts ripped out of their chests. After a lifetime of feeling unworthy, I thought I'd found my happily ever after in their arms. But it was all a lie. Instead, the steps I'd taken to repair my broken self-esteem were destroyed.

Now there's Ev. A man that I can't have, not without ruining the life he has here. Yet I can't stop myself from thinking about him. With another sigh, I take a sip of my coffee and resign myself to a future filled with lonely nights and lots of cats.

The sooner I deal with everything I came here to fix, the sooner I can leave again. I need to put some distance between me and the men who threaten to knock down every wall I've built.

I finish my coffee, feeling antsy. I could read a book, but I don't think I can concentrate on anything right now, not knowing there is a houseful of people discussing my fate. Biting my lip, my eyes drift to the kitchen, where the spare key is, before I make a decision.

“Screw it.” I put my mug on the table and jog back to the bedroom, where my running shoes are. I slip them on and grab a sweatshirt with a picture of a melting Rubik’s cube on the front and pull it on over my head. It hits my thighs, and though I’ll probably be hot, it acts as a barrier and hides the fact that I’m not wearing a bra.

I rummage through the kitchen drawer until I find the key and let myself out, locking the door behind me out of habit. I look around and take in the other new houses on the property. I’m glad they’re not super close together. I think I’d feel claustrophobic knowing everyone was in spitting distance. I walk over to the large main building, which is the one I remember, and ignore the wild beating of my heart.

“Nobody is going to hurt me. Everything is going to be fine,” I remind myself.

I reach the set of double doors, take a deep breath, and pull them open before I can talk myself out of it. The table is full, and every head turns my way when I enter, making me freeze. Okay, turning around and running away seems super appealing right now.

“Avery? Everything okay?” Hawk walks over to me, but I flinch when he reaches for me, backing up a little.

“Avery,” he chokes as Ev appears at my side.

Ev wraps his hand around mine and leads me over to the table. I look behind me and see Hawk’s head and shoulders drop in defeat, making my stomach clench with guilt. There is nothing worse than loving someone with your whole heart and not trusting them to take care of it.

“Here, you can take my seat,” Ev offers.

“Oh no, it’s fine. I can stand.”

“Sit. I’ll move down one,” Wilder offers, getting up and moving over.

I sit in the seat Wilder just vacated and grip the edge of the chair as Ev sits beside me. The air feels thick and oppressive as I stare at the tabletop before I push the fear back and look up—directly into Crew’s eyes.

“Hey, sweetheart.”

Tears prick my eyes. “Hi,” I whisper back with a smile.

“You want a drink, Avery?” Greg asks from further down the table.

I look over and shake my head. “No, I’m fine. Thank you. I just introduced myself to Ev’s fancy coffee machine.”

He grins. “The man is a coffee snob.”

“You have the exact same machine.” Ev laughs.

“That’s how I know it’s true.”

“Alright. Can we get back to what we were talking about?” Zig quiets everyone down. “Avery, are you okay to answer some questions?”

I nod. “I have things I need to say too.”

“Before we continue…” Ev pries one of my hands free from the chair and holds it in his as I turn and look at it. “I need to tell you something because I don’t ever want you to think I’ve hidden anything from you.”

A choked sound comes from somewhere around the table, but I keep my eyes on Ev’s, worried about what he might say.

“Last night, when you were sleeping, I did some digging. I’d already started, but when you went missing, it was put on the back burner while I was looking for you.”

I nod. I expected that.

“I’ve covered my digital footprint the best I can. I’m good, so I’m not worried, but there is always someone out there better. There is always a risk when we delve into things people have spent a lot of time and money hiding.”

“I get it, Ev. I trust you.” Another choking sound. “I don’t think you’d willingly throw me to the wolves.”

“Never.” He smiles at me before sitting up a little straighter.

“My digging turned up your real identity.”

I freeze, feeling my face pale.

“Hey, don’t panic. Nobody in this room would ever reveal what we know.”

I look around warily and nod.

“I know that putting your faith in us right now seems like the worst idea, but with this, you can trust us, Avery. We would never put you in danger,” Creed says.

Truth

I look at him, his earnest eyes boring into mine, before I blow out a breath. “Okay.”

“You didn’t tell us because you were told not to reveal who you really were, right?” Hawk asks, taking his seat back at the table.

“The marshals that came for me were really adamant about it. They told everyone I had gone to live with distant relatives in Canada, but really, they changed my name and gave me a whole new identity and moved me to Texas. I was placed with a foster family for a few weeks, but then the marshal came and took me to a group home and told me that’s where I’d stay

until I aged out.”

Zig frowns at me. “Did he tell you why they were moving you?”

“He made it seem like the family couldn’t cope with my nightmares and stuff, but they were nice to me, so I don’t know. A lot’s a blur from back then.”

“I’m sure it is. How old were you?”

“Fifteen.”

“How old were you when you realized you were gifted?”

I turn my head at the sound of Wilder’s voice. I shrug. “It’s hard to say for sure, but once I knew the difference between a truth and a lie, I knew when someone was fibbing. The problem was I thought everyone could tell, so I had no idea I was different. I was always getting into trouble. I was so frustrated that people couldn’t just say what they meant, and... I’d get angry.”

“Violent?” Oz asks.

“No. I was a kid. I’d storm out of rooms, slam doors, yell at my stuffed toys—that kind of thing. As I got older, I realized I was special and found it easier because I could hide that part of me.”

“That had to be hard,” Ev says gently.

“No, hiding was the easy part. Pretending I wasn’t affected by it was something else altogether. I knew when my teachers disliked me or friends lied about inviting me over. Small stuff, I realize now, but it hurt a lot as a kid. I always felt like an outsider. The only people who knew what I could do were my mom and dad, and I think that’s why they kept their distance from me. I had a nanny who couldn’t speak English, so I could never tell if she was lying or not. And a cook and a maid came every day. I had everything I needed.”

“Except love,” Greg replies.

I briefly look at Hawk and Creed before looking away.

“It must be hard to love someone who can hear every lie you tell, even if it’s a white lie designed not to hurt their feelings. They would tell me I was a good dancer, but I knew they were lying. They said they were proud of me when I managed to pull my math grade up from a C to a B, but my dad lied. He was disappointed, and he couldn’t hide it even though he tried. Then one day, my mom asked him if he was having an affair, and he said no. He looked me in the eye as he said it, knowing I knew the truth.”

“Your father was a dickhead,” Oz snaps, making me jump.

“Oz,” Zig reprimands him, but I huff out a laugh.

“No, he’s right. He told me later how much it would hurt my mother to find out the truth. That it was over, which, by the way, was a lie. When they argued about it again that night, he told my mom to just ask me. I’d be able to tell her the truth so she could stop attacking him for nothing.”

“That son of a bitch made you lie to your mom.”

“I should have just told the truth. It was a lesson I took to heart.”

“Evander says you work for a department in the government that locates missing kids.” Jagger changes the subject. “How did you get into that?”

“Coincidence, actually. I was in an all-girls group home, and as one of the older girls, I looked after the younger ones. Everyone who came in had a story, some worse than others, but they wouldn’t talk about it. Nobody likes to talk about the monsters in their nightmares. Anyway, along with being able to detect a lie, I’m also really good at getting people to talk to me and draw out the truth. One of the women that volunteered was impressed and said she knew a place that might be interested in someone like me. I thought she meant, like, in a counseling capacity, but it turned out to be so much more than that.”

“You liked what you did?”

“*Like* is the wrong word. You can’t look at that much horror and not carry it home with you. For every kid we saved, we lost two more. But bringing them home, giving them peace, putting their captors behind bars, and helping them heal a little? Yeah, it was worth every sleepless night. I interned for three years. I got hired full-time the day I met Creed.”

“You worked with gifted children?” Creed questions.

“Not back then. The department I worked in dealt with more sensitive situations. Like sexual predators with diplomatic immunity, for example. I didn’t change departments until Cooper took me back and told them that I was gifted.”

“Fucker ratted you out.”

“Are you sure they really didn’t know what you could do?”

“Yes. There were other people who could read people exceptionally well. It made it easy to blend in until Cooper revealed the truth.”

“And they just believed him?” Oz frowns.

“I was unconscious for a week after my return. So I missed a chunk of what went on, but it was clear when I woke up that Cooper and the Boss Man knew each other.”

“Boss Man?” Zig leans forward.

“He heads up the Division. Him and his right-hand man, Arthur Smith.”

“Why does that name sound familiar?” Oz asks, but I just shrug. How the heck am I supposed to know?

“Do you know a man named Penn Travis?”

“How do you know that name?”

“How about you tell us what you know first?” Slade speaks.

I flush and dip my head. Right. They don’t trust me.

“We just want to compare notes, Avery. That’s all,” Jagger soothes, but I can feel the humming over my skin.

I look at him and smile, but it feels brittle. “Lie.”

His face flushes this time.

I shake it off. What does it matter what they think of me? “Penn Travis isn’t a man.”

“Now who’s lying?” Slade questions.

I glare at him. “Penn Travis is many men.”

Zig’s eyes open wide. “Explain.”

“I don’t know where the Travis part comes from, but the Penn part is the division designation. Parapsychology, environmental, neurobiology, and neuroscience.”

“Fucking hell,” Crew mutters.

“Okay, I’ll level with you,” Oz starts. “Salem met a man calling himself Penn Travis when she was a kid. He helped her develop her gift.”

“Astrid also met a man named Penn Travis when she was a teenager. He saved her life, but he was not the same man that Salem met.” Jagger leans his elbows on the table, studying me.

“It’s not my area, but what I do know is that each child identified as gifted is given a handler. Often one who is also gifted, to help guide them and protect them when necessary.”

“Wait, hold on. That smells like bullshit to me,” Oz states.

“If they knew where these so-called gifted children were, why not take them then? As for protection, Salem was in a fucking cartel prison, for God’s sake!”

“Hey,” Ev snaps at him.

Oz growls but leans back a bit.

“Like I said, I don’t know everything. A lot I know is from snooping around where I shouldn’t because I needed answers.” I look at Oz and Zig.

“This is not a new division. It dates back to the early fifties when Eisenhower was in power. In the beginning, I think gifted people were rounded up. Not many because it was much harder to track people back then. We didn’t have nearly the same kind of resources we do now. They collected people and kept them, trying to figure out what made them special.”

“They experimented on them? On children?” Zig’s face is like thunder.

“We’d just come out of one war and were on the cusp of another. The government wanted super soldiers to give them the edge.”

“And did they get them?”

“No. Gifted people tend to have elevated empathic abilities. The captives failed to thrive.”

“Like animals held in captivity.” Hawk nods. “So, they stopped collecting them and monitored them instead, giving them the illusion of freedom.”

I nod. “That’s what I believe.”

“For what purpose, though? If the government isn’t using these people for their own gain anymore, then why watch them?”

“Who said they weren’t using them for their own gain? Freedom is just an illusion, remember?”

“So, they manipulated the game, moving pieces around until these people were exactly where they wanted them.”

“Yes. Some inevitably fell through the cracks over the years. While others…” I take a deep breath. “Gifted people are not immune to mental illness. If anything, our gifts can have a greater toll on our psyche. There is a high suicide rate among gifted adults and teens.”

Slade looks at me before his gaze drifts to Jagger. “And these Penn guys. What happens to them?”

“What do you mean?”

“What happens if they lose their ward or if they go rogue or something?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know.”

I look around, feeling like I’m missing something. But naturally, none of them feel like filling me in.

I twist my hands together, feeling out of place again, before Ev sighs. “The Penn that saved Astrid—” Slade says E’s name to shut him up.

Ev growls at him. “You want her to lay everything out, knowing she’s putting herself in danger for doing it, and yet you still want to hold things back? We’ll never find out their end game if we don’t have the full picture.”

“He’s right. Sorry, Avery. But after Cooper, we’re all finding it hard to

trust.” Slade sighs.

Truth.

I nod, pretending I understand, but I don’t because I’m not sure what Cooper did to them. I put a pin in that for now and turn to Ev.

“As I was saying, the Penn that saved Astrid was the same one who tried to kill Salem.”

I jolt in my seat, shock rendering me speechless for a minute as I let the information filter through my brain. Pieces start to snap together, twisting what I thought I knew into something else.

“Is she the pregnant one? Salem? Is she the pregnant one?” I’m sure Ev told me she is, but I need to make sure.

Zig nods, his jaw tense.

I reach out and snag his hand, bile rushing up my throat. “Was she pregnant when she was attacked?”

When he hesitates, I squeeze his hand tighter.

“Please, Zig, it’s important.”

“Yeah. The man Astrid knew as Penn Travis specifically aimed for the baby. With a sword.”

I jump up, my chair tipping back as I start pacing.

“Talk to me, Avery. Is that what your seer saw?” Ev coaxes, which silences around the table.

I stop and look at him. “Bella doesn’t see the past.”

“So, what she saw is still to come. You suspected that anyway. So what has you spooked now?”

“Babies. It all comes down to babies. The Penn Division is locating children and teens who are tagged as gifted and manipulating them into certain circumstances where they’re being controlled without realizing it. They want happy people. It’s the key to a truly strong gift. That’s only part of it, though. The key is the children.”

“What children? The gifted ones?” Oz asks, confused.

I shake my head, realizing I’m not making sense. “Gifts can present naturally or be inherited. Sometimes weaker, sometimes just as strong. But in almost all cases where the gifted get pregnant, it is from a union with one gifted partner and one non-gifted partner.”

Creed gets up and walks over to me, his hands reaching for my wrists. “Take a deep breath for me, Avery. Before you pass out.”

Feeling lightheaded, I do as he asks, feeling the room spin around me.

“Someone get her some juice. Here, sit back down.” Creed rights my chair before nudging me into it. Crouching down in front of me, his thumbs stroking over the backs of my hands. Someone hands him the juice, and he takes it, holding the glass to my lips.

I sip it slowly, feeling my heart start to slow a little.

“Better?”

I nod. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“You okay to carry on, or do you need a break?” Ev asks.

“I’m okay. This is important.”

“Alright.”

Creed stands up, his hand smoothing my hair back before he walks back to his seat.

“Where was I?”

“Children with a non-gifted and gifted parent,” Crew says softly.

“Right. The Division has seen how strong some of the offspring are, but they also question how much stronger their gifts would be if both their parents were gifted.”

“Despite what’s going on here, the odds of two gifted people actually running into each other, let alone falling in love and having babies with them, has to be slim, right?” Jagger looks at Ev, then me.

“Better odds of winning the lottery, I imagine. But remember what I said about the Division being manipulative?”

“Are you saying they’re acting as cupid for the extra-special people out there?” Slade huffs.

“Not even close. I mean, sure, they’ll push couples together if it’s an option, but they don’t need two humans to have sex to make a baby. They just need the woman’s eggs and the man’s sperm.”

“Holy fuck,” Hawk chokes.

“Exactly. And they can get those in any number of ways without the biological parents even knowing. Let’s say, for instance, a woman is in a car accident. She has to go into surgery for whatever reason. A doctor on the payroll could harvest the eggs at the same time, and any discomfort afterward would be attributed to the accident.”

“That’s so fucking illegal,” Crew hisses.

“It’s a means to an end, and they gave up on caring about what’s legal years ago when they started tagging people’s DNA.”

“What does this have to do with Salem, though? They want to get rid of our baby because me and Oz aren’t gifted? That doesn’t make sense. Our kiddo could still be powerful, especially if she’s a girl—” Zig’s words come to a halt as he looks at me.

Tears slip down my cheeks at the look on his face.

“She’s carrying a boy, isn’t she?”

“If I’m putting everything together right, then yeah. The only way they’d target your child was if they were useless to them. And the only way they’d know that for sure...”

“Is if we have a son, because Salem’s gift only passes down the female line. You think your seer told them?”

“I don’t know, maybe. She’s just a little girl. She wouldn’t understand what the big deal was.”

“Why the fuck bother coming after our boy if he’s no threat to them?” Oz roars, jumping up.

Zig grips his brother’s wrist to calm him, but his eyes stay on mine. “Does the name Alejandro Ortiz mean anything to you?”

I nod. “His father, Gerardo Ortiz, was a childhood friend of Arthur Smith. I heard some people in the office talking about Arthur was stupid to fly out for his funeral in case anyone recognized him.”

“And I’m betting fucking Alejandro recognized him,” Oz hisses.

“That’s probably why...” Zig trails off, looking at Oz.

“What are you thinking?” asks Hawk.

“When Alejandro got his hands on Salem at the clinic, there was another man there. He was there to collect Salem, but Alejandro mentioned something about a deal. I’d have to talk to Salem for the details, but the man said Alejandro could do what he wanted as long as he didn’t get her pregnant. I’m guessing the Penn Division already had plans for Salem’s baby daddy, and it wasn’t Alejandro.”

“So why was she even with the psycho in the first place? That’s what I can’t understand,” Greg questions.

“If Arthur and Gerardo were friends, then my guess is he loaned Salem to them, figuratively speaking, to heal his son.”

“When we broke her out of the cell, it was too easy. We knew that. Makes me wonder if it was Salem’s Penn Travis helping us,” Zig says.

“It still doesn’t justify him blowing up the fucking clinic and killing everyone,” Oz huffs.

“Are you talking about the clinic in Izamal?”

“You know what happened there?”

“No. What I do know is that it wasn’t the work of any Penn Travis. It was a military operation. Intel said they were terrorists. I don’t know anything more than that.”

“It’s all making a twisted sort of sense now.” Crew shakes his head.

“And yet brings up a million more questions,” Wilder grunts before looking at me. “Can I ask why you lost it there for a second? I’m still not sure I get it. You came here to warn us about the baby being in danger, so why the freak-out?”

“I did, though I wasn’t sure which baby or who it belonged to at the time. The problem is that they didn’t just send someone to take out the baby. That person was more than happy to take out Salem, too, by the sounds of it, and that is not something Boss Man would sanction. He’ll want Salem for his collection because of how gifted she is. The fact that my seer has seen a second attack is what scares me more. Isolated incidents happen. You get rogue players and people that go against orders. But this is something else, and I have a feeling they’ll keep coming until they get exactly what they want.”

“Over my dead body,” Zig snarls.

“That’s what worries me.”

Chapter Twenty

Evander

I let go of Avery's hand and unlock the door, holding it open for her to head inside.

"You really didn't have to come with me."

"I wanted to. I think we could all do with a little break."

"I feel that, trust me."

"Why don't you get comfortable, and I'll make us something to drink?"

"Are you sure? I can help."

"I've got it. Are you hungry?"

"No. My stomach is too twisted up to even think about eating."

"Just relax, then. I won't be long."

Avery kicks off her sneakers and does as I ask, walking over to one of the sofas before snuggling into the corner of it. She winces when she leans awkwardly on her shoulder.

The stitches and everything look good, but she's going to need a couple more physical therapy sessions before everything feels normal again. I'm sure she'd rather find someone who doesn't know what Hawk's cock feels like inside them.

"Ugh."

I chuckle, placing her drink down on the table in front of her.

"Oh, fancy."

"Just a mocktail for you, I'm afraid. With your painkillers, I didn't want to risk it."

"I've stopped taking them, but this is sweet. Thank you."

"Seriously? You were shot, for God's sake."

"I know, trust me, but I didn't like the way they made me feel. And honestly, it's healing much better than I anticipated. It only really hurts if I knock it or overdo it with the stretching. Washing and styling my hair is probably the hardest thing to do right now. Otherwise, it's fine."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Alright. I just don't like the thought of you in pain." I sit next to her, turned toward her, with my glass in my hand.

She turns to face me, tucking her legs under herself. “Thank you.”

“For what?” I ask, sipping my drink before sliding it onto the table beside hers.

She shrugs. “For everything. For your support. Not just in there, but from the start.”

“I want to say it’s because I’m a good guy, but it’s more than that. I like you, Avery. I like you a lot. I know that’s fucked up, given who you’re married to, but—”

My words are cut off when she leans forward and presses her lips to mine. I freeze for a second, knowing the right thing to do here is to pull back. But when the tip of her tongue traces the seam of my lips, I’m done.

I reach over and grab her hips, yanking her into my lap. She straddles me, her hands gripping my shoulders for balance as I slide a hand into her hair and kiss her like I’ve been dreaming about since the day I saw her lying in that hospital bed, her big, wounded eyes calling to a part of my soul.

She loses herself in the moment, her body coming alive as she grinds down on my now rock-hard dick. Any second, I’m going to come, but I refuse to do that until I’m inside her.

I break the kiss, both of us breathing heavily as we catch our breath. She looks at me for a second before the haze clears, and shame fills her features.

“God, I’m sorry.” She’s off me and running to the bedroom before I can say anything.

“What the fuck?” I jump up and run after her.

She shoves the door to close it, but I catch it with my foot and push it open. She spins when she senses me in the room with her. Her wild eyes dart around like she’s looking for an escape.

“Avery, calm down and tell me what’s wrong.”

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong? I kissed you. I’m a cheater. I promised myself that after what my dad did to my mom, I’d never be that person. And here I am, acting like some two-bit slut.”

I stalk toward her and push her down onto the bed before climbing on top of her and pinning her in place. “You are not a cheat. Jesus, Avery, you’ve been separated for four fucking years.”

“I’m still married, though. And I feel like it taints it somehow, and I don’t want to do that to us.”

I sigh and press my forehead against hers. “You’re killing me. I want to be inside you so fucking bad.”

She lets out a choked gasp before I press a quick kiss to her lips and climb off her. I take her in, lying on my bed with her hair spread out behind her like a halo, and find it almost impossible to stop myself from thinking about all the dirty, wicked things I want to do to her. Her cheeks and throat are flushed with arousal, and her eyes glassy with a need that might kill us both if we don't do something about it.

“Take your top off.”

“Ev.”

“I won't touch you. But it's not cheating if you touch yourself now, is it?”

She hesitates for a second, her eyes following my tongue as I lick my lips. Eventually, she tugs my sweatshirt off over her head and tosses it to the side.

“And the T-shirt.”

“You promise you won't touch me?” she whispers.

“You have my word.”

She nods, pulling the T-shirt over her head, revealing her naked breasts. I curse as my dick pushes against the zipper of my jeans.

“No bra?” I croak out as she shakes her head.

“It's in the laundry, and I haven't gotten my things back yet.”

And for the first time, I'm grateful for it. “Lay back on the pillows and slip your shorts off. I want to see your pretty pussy.”

“This feels wrong, Ev,” she tells me, but she hooks her fingers in the edge of the borrowed boxers and lifts her ass, sliding them down until she can kick them free.

“It feels all kinds of right to me. Spread your legs for me, Avery,” I order as I pop open the fly of my jeans and pull my cock out. I take a step closer to the bed and stroke myself slowly as she bends her knees and lets her legs fall open.

“Fucking soaked,” I growl, pumping my cock harder. “Slide your hand down to your pussy and slip two fingers inside. I want you to feel how wet you are.”

Biting her lip, she hesitates for a second before she follows my orders, her eyes on my cock as her hand moves down her body. She glides her fingers through her wetness, gasping as she slides her fingers inside. Her eyes close on a moan.

“Now, now, naughty girl, eyes on me. See what you do to me. I've never been so hard in my fucking life.”

“Ev,” she whispers, her eyes opening, and it takes everything in me not to

come.

“Add another finger, baby. I want you to imagine it’s my cock, and I’m much thicker than two fingers.”

She slips a third finger inside and starts pumping them slowly. I can see how wet they are from here, and I’d love nothing more than to take those fingers in my mouth and suck them clean.

“Good girl. You look so fucking sexy. Jesus, the things I want to do to you.”

“Tell me,” she moans, using her free hand to cup her breast and pinch her nipple.

“I want to fuck your cunt with my tongue. Taste all that sweet nectar as I drink down your cum. You’d grip my hair so tight, grinding against my face. Hmmm,” I murmur, stroking myself faster.

“Then, once you’ve come on my tongue, I’d slide up your body and kiss you so you can taste how delicious you are. You’d feel my cock pressing against your stomach. And like the naughty girl you are, you’d angle your hips, trying to find a way to take me inside you. But not yet. You’re not desperate enough yet.”

I step closer, so now I’m standing at the side of the bed, in touching distance. Her breath hitches when she realizes I can just reach out and slip a finger in next to hers, but I won’t break my promise to her.

“I’d suck your rosy nipple into my mouth and tug it hard before flicking it with my tongue. When you start begging, I’d nip you with my teeth, making you whimper, and then I’d do it to your other nipple. I’d line my cock up with your pussy, but I won’t give in, not until you say my name over and over.”

I lick my lips, so close to coming it’s killing me. “Stroke your clit, Avery. Harder. Feel good?”

“So good,” she whimpers.

I dip my head until my face is inches from hers. “With your eyes locked on mine, I’d surge inside you, not stopping until you take every fucking inch of me. I’d want to give you time to adjust, but you’re so damn tight and wet that I can’t control myself. I’d fuck you harder and harder, watching your tits bounce with each thrust until you arch up and your eyes roll back into your head.

“You’d scratch your nails down my back and wrap your legs around me. I’d feel it the second you let go. You’d squeeze my dick so tight, I’d pump

you full of my cum as you scream my name.”

And scream my name she does. Her hips lift as she pinches her clit, the orgasm ripping through her. I straighten, stroking my cock a couple more times, and cum all over her stomach and pussy.

I take a step back before I touch her, breaking the promise that keeps us a whisper apart. The only thing connecting us right now is our shared breathing, but even that feels intimate.

Her eyes close, and her face flushes as reality crashes in. I fist my hands, not wanting her to regret what just happened between us. But when she looks my way and guilt flashes in her eyes, I tuck my cock away and head to the bathroom.

I grab a small washcloth and wet it before carrying it out and handing it to her, even though I'd love nothing more than to clean her up myself. My eyes follow her movements as she wipes my cum from her skin.

Feeling my dick getting hard again, I cough to clear my throat and collect the T-shirt and boxers she was wearing, holding them out to her. She bites her lip as she looks up at me. I take the towel from her as she reaches up and takes the clothes from me.

“I'll give you a second.” I turn and walk toward the bathroom, dropping the cloth in the laundry basket on my way. I wash my hands before looking at myself in the mirror—leaning on the counter, my fingers gripping it tightly, thinking about my next move. I might have pushed too hard, too fast, but I don't regret a single second. I might be willing to hold back so Avery's brain can catch up to what the rest of her is feeling, but there is no chance of me backing off completely. I don't know why this woman has me in such a tailspin. I've met a million beautiful women before, but none of them called to me the way Avery does.

Taking a deep breath, I head back into the bedroom but pause when I find Avery on the other side of the door, looking hesitant. “I need to use the bathroom,” she whispers.

I step aside and let her in, but before she can close the door, I reach out and tug her to my chest, wrapping my arms around her. I don't say anything as she stands there, rigid against me. Eventually, she relaxes and lifts her arms to wrap around my waist.

Pressing a kiss to her head, I breathe her in. “I know your head's a mess. But I'm going to just lay everything out because I want you to know, no matter what, I'll always be straight with you.”

She tips her head up and looks at me as I continue.

“I don’t regret what we did. In fact, it’s taking everything in me not to demand a repeat performance, but that’s not what you need right now.” I dip my head and brush my lips across hers before pulling back. “I’m in this with you until the end. We can work through whatever comes if we talk it out. Trust me to not judge you or demand more from you than you’re ready to give.”

Her eyes close, and a single tear runs down her cheek. “I wish I could have met you first. I would’ve loved you, and only you, for a lifetime,” her voice cracks, and her eyes open. “But I didn’t, and a part of my heart will always belong to Hawk and Creed. God, if I could switch off my feelings for them, I would do it in a heartbeat. But I can’t.”

She’s quiet for a second before she laughs, but there’s no humor in it. “If only falling in love came with a money-back guarantee. Some kind of protection plan or safety net that stops you from falling for the bad guy or even just the wrong guy. Instead, your heart keeps on taking those hits, each blow leaving a mark that you carry into the next relationship and the one after that. We can survive a few beatings, but what happens when love turns toxic and the marks don’t fade? They become scars. And I have a lot of scars, Ev. I have so much scar tissue, I’m surprised my heart even works anymore.”

“You see a scarred heart as weak when I see it as strong. What you see as damage, I see as amour that held true. So, your walls might be higher, and your broken edges might make those walls harder to scale. But a man who is afraid of bleeding for the woman he loves doesn’t deserve her in the first place. A woman bled to bring him into the world. It only seems fitting that he bleeds for the woman he intends to spend the rest of his days with.”

“Evander,” she whispers before laying her head against my chest.

Nothing else is said as she listens to the rapid thud of my heart. Eventually, she pulls back and gives me a sad smile before stepping into the bathroom and closing the door.

Gripping my hair, I head out to the living room, putting some space between us. I walk over to the window and stare out. The sky is gray and ominous, and if the clouds in the distance are anything to go by, rain is on the horizon.

Biting my lip, I think about what my end game is here. I’ll admit, I might not have been thinking clearly. My thoughts were all on making Avery see me—want me. If what just happened is anything to go by, she does. I never

factored in her feelings for Hawk and Creed, though I should have. That's what I do, after all. I analyze things, look at things from every angle until I have a full picture, and then I make my move.

Avery makes my best intentions go out the fucking window. I can imagine us together. I can see a future for us as clearly as if it were playing out before my eyes. But in each daydream, I notice something is missing in her eyes. She might be the woman of my dreams, but I'm not the man of hers.

I stomp into the kitchen, grab the bottle of whiskey from the cupboard, and rip the lid off. I don't bother with a glass. I take a couple of swings straight from the bottle, relishing the burn I feel in my chest. I might be an itch Avery can't scratch, but Hawk and Creed are buried under her skin. In ten—or twenty—years, my happily ever after might become Avery's shackles.

I put the bottle back before I drink too much and turn just as Avery steps into the room, standing there in my clothes with that damn look of uncertainty on her face. I realize two things. One, whoever said love at first sight was bullshit had just never experienced it. It's way too early to be feeling what I'm feeling, but it doesn't change the fact that I know that, in another life, this woman was supposed to be mine.

Which brings me to my second revelation. Loving Avery means wanting her to be happy, no matter the cost to me. Hawk and Creed can make her happy if they can sort their shit out. As she steps closer to me, I swallow the nausea that makes the whiskey swirl in my stomach.

If healing Avery means helping Hawk and Creed fix what they broke, so be it.

Chapter Twenty-One

Avery

Lying in bed, I stare at the ceiling as I hear the door click open. I close my eyes and pretend to sleep as I hear E enter the room. After what happened earlier, my head was all over the place. My body reacts to him being this close even now, but my heart is torn in two.

He backed off after I found him standing in the kitchen. I know he's trying to keep a respectful distance between us—just another reason why I like the guy so much. But keeping my distance from the man is going to prove difficult.

I have no business getting involved with the man when my life is one big old cesspit of chaos and danger. I haven't recovered from the last time I let men into my heart, and now, with my job—and heck, life on the line—tying myself to E would only put him in danger. The best thing I can do is ask Zig if there is somewhere else I can stay. The only thing that keeps me from opening my mouth is the knowledge that they'd probably put me with Hawk and Creed.

I hear him undress. I swallow, trying to keep my body relaxed even as I feel certain parts wake up. This is bad, so fucking bad. I can't deny that I've been going through the motions for the last few years in a kind of self-imposed trance. But something about E has snapped me out of it and forced me to remember that there is more to life than just being alive. You have to actually live too. I hear the creak of the chair as he sits down and feel tears prick my eyes.

He's seriously going to spend the night in the chair? Jesus, I can't do this.

“Ev?”

“Shit. Sorry, Avery. I didn't mean to wake you.”

“You didn't. I can't sleep. My brain just won't switch off.”

“Want me to play some music or something?”

“No. I want you to come lie down with me.” Fuck, I didn't mean to say that, but I won't sleep at all if I know he's sitting in the damn chair.

“Avery, it's fine. You don't need to worry about me.”

“You don't need to worry about me either, and yet there is a reason why you're choosing to sleep in that chair instead of on the sofa.”

He doesn't answer, so I flip the covers back, thankful now that the crazy hot spell has ended. The storm tonight brought with it a ton of rain and lowered the temperature by probably fifteen degrees.

"Come on. We're both adults, and the bed is huge."

He doesn't move for a minute, but eventually, I hear him pad across the floor on bare feet and feel him climb in beside me. I roll away from him, leaving plenty of space between us, and close my eyes. My body feels alive with him this close, but it also feels safe, which goes a long way toward helping me relax.

I cover my mouth and yawn. "Night, Ev."

"Night, Avery." His deep voice rumbles over my skin moments before I fall asleep.

When I wake up, I can tell it's light out, even though the shutters keep it dark in here. There is just enough muted light filtering in for me to make out the shapes of the furniture in the room. It takes me a second to realize I'm not on my side anymore but sprawled across E's chest. *E's bare chest.*

God, please don't let me have left a puddle of drool.

As discreetly as I can, I lift my hand and wipe my mouth. Attempting to slide away without disturbing him, I jolt when his arm tightens around me and he moans in his sleep. My clit responds with a throb, making me bite back a moan of my own. Dear sweet baby Jesus, now I understand why they say the path to hell is paved with good intentions.

He might have had a stiff neck from sleeping in the chair, but now he has something else stiff, and it's pressing against my leg. And Lord, it's making me forget all the reasons I told myself to stay away from the man.

When his other arm moves over me and his hand cups my ass, I know I'm fucked. And if I don't get off this bed right now, it won't just be figurative. I pull back and roll away, not bothering to worry about waking him.

"Avery?" His sleepy voice almost makes me orgasm on the spot. I don't know whether to laugh or scream.

"Hmm," I reply, sitting up, studiously not looking at him.

"You okay?"

"Mm-hmm. I just need to use the bathroom," I whisper so he doesn't hear the crack in my voice.

I climb off the bed and shut myself in the bathroom. I go pee and wash my hands, taking the time to allow my heartbeat to return to its regular beating schedule.

Taking a deep breath, I walk back into the bedroom and find Ev leaning on his elbow, watching me. Okay, so going back to bed is not an option.

“I’m going to get something to drink. Now that I’m awake, I won’t be able to sleep again.”

He opens his mouth to say something. I know if he offers his services to help me relax, I’ll end up bouncing on his dick before I remember why it is a ridiculously bad idea. In this situation, I do the only thing I can. I run, stubbing my toe and cursing like a motherfucker as I make a mad dash to the living room.

It’s cooler out here, thank God, because I’m about to spontaneously combust. I lean against the kitchen counter, and when I realize how cold the countertop is, I lean over and press my burning cheeks to it. It helps a little until Ninja Boy, aka Evander, steps up behind me and presses his hard dick against my ass. And I gasp, grinding against him.

His hands move to my hips for a second, and I whimper. But he finds the strength I seem to be lacking and backs away with a curse.

“I’m sorry.” I have no idea why I’m acting like a nympho.

“You don’t need to be sorry,” he grunts out. “But you do need to stand up. I’m trying to be strong here, but I’m a man, Avery. My willpower only goes so far when you’re bent over in front of me like that. All I can think about is sliding my dick inside your slick pussy. And, baby, we both know right now you’re dripping.”

“Not helping,” I tell him through gritted teeth as I bang my head against the countertop.

“Hey, hey, stop that. How about we both get dressed and get out of here for a bit? Some fresh air will do us the world of good.”

“That sounds like a really freaking good idea. Let me just go take a cold shower and put some clothes on. That’ll help.”

“Only if you’re planning on wearing a burka,” he mumbles under his breath.

I hurry back to the bedroom, which now feels like the scene of a crime, and straight into the bathroom. I strip out of my clothes and climb into the shower, the cool water rushing over me, but I know it won’t be enough. I look at the closed door and think, *Fuck it*.

I slip my fingers between my legs and stroke my clit. I let my eyes drift closed as I replay the scene of me on the bed with E standing over me. Biting my lip to stop myself from crying out, I imagine my fingers are his. I’m so

aroused, it doesn't take long for me to come. Ev's whispered name is lost in the spray of the shower, rapidly cooling down my overheated skin. Thankfully, that seems to have done the trick. As I climb out and dry myself off, I feel more in control than I did before.

Realizing I haven't brought any clothes in with me, I wrap the towel around my body, which would be fine if the towel wasn't so damn small. And with a curse, I open the door and suck in a lungful of air when I find E leaning against the door frame, his dark eyes full of fire as he looms over me.

“You think of me while you were fucking your pretty little cunt?”

And just like that, my good intentions almost go out the window.

Almost.

I bite the inside of my cheek so hard that I can taste blood. “Ev,” I whisper.

He shakes his head, a growl ripping from his throat. “Just go. Go before I do something you'll regret.”

I slip past him and watch as he disappears into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. I sit on the edge of the bed, my legs no longer strong enough to hold me up.

“You'll regret,” I repeat to myself, noting that he said nothing about regretting it himself. He's holding back for me, but right now, I'm hanging on by a thread.

Spotting my bag on the bed, I hurry to find clean clothes and take them out, pulling on my underwear, which is easier than it sounds when my skin is still damp. Once they're on, I shove my legs into a pair of beige sweatpants and yank an oversized black hoodie on over my head before grabbing my brush and leaving the room just as I hear the shower.

Brushing my hair as I walk, I use the hairband on my wrist to secure my hair on top of my head in a messy bun before tossing the brush on the counter. I bend and stretch my arm, rotating it a little like Jess taught me, until it begins to throb. Looking through the kitchen cupboards, I find a bottle of Tylenol and pour myself a glass of water. I pop a couple of pills in my mouth and swallow them before heading over to the door to grab my sneakers. Belatedly, I realize I forgot to grab socks, but I refuse to go back to the bedroom where Ev is naked, running a hand over his—

Nope. Don't go there, Avery. This is getting ridiculous. With a huff, I sit down and shove my feet into my sneakers before lacing them up with far more aggression than necessary. I'm standing ready by the door when Ev

comes out dressed in gray sweatpants and a white wife beater. My eyes drift down to the crotch of his sweatpants, and I blink before finally losing it.

“Nope. Go change.”

“Huh?” He looks at me like I’ve grown a third tit. Maybe I have, but I’ve reached my limit. How the fuck does he expect me to behave with him walking around here looking like a thirst trap? Nope. Not happening. Sweatpants are my kryptonite. If he doesn’t change, we’re going to have a huge problem. A huge problem that I’m going to ride until he’s chaffed in uncomfortable places and I end up pregnant.

“You can’t wear those out. We’re supposed to be getting air so that we don’t jump each other. This”—I wave my hand around to encompass his sweatpants—“is not helping. It’s hard enough resisting GI Joe Evander. I’m not strong enough to resist sweatpants Evander too.”

He grins and takes a step forward. I press my back against the wall, feeling trapped and horny.

“They’re just sweatpants, Avery.”

“No, they’re not. They’re porn pants, handmade by the devil himself. Women around the world would sign their souls away with one hand while jilling themselves with the other if they could see you now.”

He bursts out laughing, which doesn’t help because now his cock is bobbing. I swallow hard and tap the side of my thighs, needing to leave before I drop to my knees and get a better look. You know, for science.

“You’re killing me. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

I shake my head and cross my arms. “Change first.”

“I’m not changing, and if I were to say the same to you, you’d kick my ass.”

“If I wore something that outlined the lips of my pussy, I’m sure you’d be saying the same.”

Now, it’s his turn to swallow. “You can’t see anything, Avery.” He drops his head to look.

“You might not be able to, but even if I hadn’t seen you naked, I’d be able to tell you’re above average-sized, thick enough to make me consider jaw exercises, and you tuck to the left.” I cross my arms over my chest as his grin grows even wider.

“You know what? I’m feeling pretty damn comfortable right now, so I’ll take my chances.”

I shake my head and turn, unlocking the door and yanking it open. “Fine,

wear your porn pants, but don't come crying to me when it ends badly."

I step outside and breathe in deeply. There is something about mountain air after it rains that just feels superior to the air quality everywhere else. I know I sound like I have a screw loose, but being here, where the mountains touch the sky, I feel like I can breathe for the first time in years.

Ev locks up and stands beside me. "Where to?"

I avoid looking at his sweatpants and shrug. "I don't know. It's changed a lot since I've been gone," I tell him quietly.

"How about we walk down to the orchards? It's where I go to think."

I look up at him and nod. "Sounds good."

He takes my hand and leads the way. I take in all the new buildings as we make our way down the footpath through the trees lining the perimeter.

"Is this all Apex?" I ask as he pulls out a set of keys and unlocks the gate before typing a code into the keypad.

"It is," he replies, locking the gate before rearming it.

"What's with the gates? They were never alarmed before."

"A lot has happened since you've been gone. And they're not just alarmed, they're also electrified. So you might not want to touch them."

"Yikes. Thanks for the heads-up. Though there's gonna be a baby here soon, so you might want to rethink the whole electrocution thing."

"We'll come up with something. It was mostly in place while the last of the work was being done. We have reinforced access tunnels, panic rooms, and cameras all over the place too."

"Good. I hope it's enough."

"It has to be. I refuse to lose anyone."

I look up at him, his jaw tight. "Life doesn't work that way, Ev. We don't get to pick and choose who lives or dies."

"Doesn't mean I won't do everything I can to stack the odds in our favor." Well, I can't argue with that.

We walk the rest of the way in silence until we reach another fence—this one, a plain wooden one. Ev helps me climb over it, and then there are trees heavy with fruit as far as the eye can see.

"Wow. That's a lot of fruit."

He laughs. "I know. The oranges are in season, so that's no surprise, but we've got a lot of confused fruit blooming out of season, thanks to the crazy weather we've been having lately."

"Like the heatwave?"

“Yeah. Thankfully, we’ve had our share of rain, too, so we haven’t had to worry much about droughts or fires.”

He leads me through the trees to a creek with large rocks on either side. He points at a spot for me to sit, so I do, and he drops down beside me.

“I can see why you like it here. It’s so peaceful.”

“Most of my work is done online. It’s fast-paced and always changing. I tend to get so lost in what I’m doing that I forget there is a life away from the screen. Fuck, I’d forget to eat if the guys didn’t bring me food. This place gives me space to disconnect for a little while. I leave my laptop and rarely bring my cell phone.”

“Self-care is important, or so I’ve been told.” I laugh. “To be fair, I’m my own worst enemy. I take care of everyone else before worrying about myself.”

“Sounds familiar.” He snorts.

“My problem is that I try to make everyone happy. I know it sounds normal. But have you ever loved someone who was so negative that you made it your sole mission to make them happy? You twist and mold yourself into someone you don’t recognize, knowing you have to do your best—be the best—just to make them smile? No matter what you do, though, it’s never enough. Still, you push through the tears, hoping this time will be different. But it never is.”

“Hawk and Creed?” He frowns.

“No. My parents. I poured everything I had into being the perfect daughter to make them happy. But it was never enough, and all it did was leave me empty. I gave and gave, and they took and took. Not once did they give back. Eventually, I had nothing left to give. We argued. We both said some pretty awful things, and then they were gone, and I couldn’t take them back.”

“They knew you loved them, Avery. Their failings were just that—theirs. It didn’t have anything to do with you. They just didn’t know how to deal with it. Being a teenager is hard. But I imagine being a parent is harder. There’s no manual or guidebook. You just get handed this baby that you have to remember to feed and water, unlike every houseplant you’ve ever owned, and hope they reach adulthood without being too fucked up to function.”

I look at him with wide eyes.

He flushes. “When I was fifteen, my girlfriend got pregnant. She was seventeen, and we weren’t ready to have a baby. Hell, we could barely look

after ourselves, but I refused to bail on her. I made myself sick worrying throughout the whole pregnancy. When she went into labor early, I swear my heart stopped.”

“Oh no, what happened?”

“She admitted she wasn’t in premature labor. She’d just lied to me about the dates because, when she got pregnant, I was away at football camp.”

“Bitch,” I snap.

He huffs out a laugh, wrapping his arm around me. “Honestly, as shitty as it was, I was relieved. If the kid had been mine, I would have been there for them, no matter what. But finding out she wasn’t was a wake-up call. I got my shit together, worked my ass off at school, and graduated early. It’s funny how things work out in the end.”

“You ever find out what happened to them?”

“Yeah, I ran into my ex ten years later, at the supermarket of all places. She’d gotten her shit together too. Got her GED, then went to college and became a nurse practitioner and midwife specializing in teen pregnancies. I found out that she’d had a pretty hard delivery and was treated terribly because of her age. But she turned the negative experience into something positive. She’d been married for two years to a firefighter when we ran into each other, and she was pregnant with her second child. I don’t hate her. I never really did. We were both so young. We messed up, but we didn’t let our fuck-ups define us.”

“I kind of love that for the both of you. I wish I could say the same thing after my fuck-ups, but I’m working on it.”

“We’re all just a work in progress, Avery.”

I lean into him and think about all the anger and animosity I’ve let consume me for so long, and I realize nothing is going to change unless I do something about it. “I think it’s time I talked to Hawk and Creed.”

He sighs but nods. “Whatever you need, Avery.” There’s a sadness in his words, but he doesn’t try to stop me or talk me out of it. Maybe he knows deep down that there’s no future for me, certainly not for us, if I can’t first deal with the past.

I just hope I don’t become one more mistake he has to learn from.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Hawk

I watched them pass by, oblivious to the rest of the world. Grabbing my phone, I sign into the secure app that lets us view the cameras on the property. I keep scrolling until I find the one for the orchard. It doesn't give me the best view, but it's good enough.

I sip my coffee as they move to the rocks near the stream. Their body language shows how comfortable they are with each other. If I didn't know any different, I'd say they've known each other for years. As much as I want to be pissed at them, I can't help but turn that anger inward.

We shoveled all the blame on her, and she was the only one of the three of us that was innocent. She might not have told us about her ability back then, but I can't say I blame her or that I wouldn't have done the same. If she had told us the truth, me and Creed would probably have bolted. I feel like shit for even thinking it. Fuck, I think it's time to face up to what we did. We hid our guilt and shame with anger and pointed our fingers at Avery so that nobody would look at us. Everything Avery said was true. Why did we so easily believe she ran? Why the fuck didn't we look for her, drag her back, and try to fix things? Hell, we just kidnapped her for answers four years after they were due. If she had never returned, we would've never pushed the issue.

We don't deserve her. We never did, but I'm still too much of a dick to just give up. Everything she is giving to Ev, she once gave to us. And I want it back. The fact that she came here after everything we did is a testament to the type of woman she is.

I watch as E wraps his arm around her and realize that we might have already lost her.

I leave my coffee on the table, grab my keys, and head out to the orchard. Maybe she'll talk to me somewhere neutral. I get lost in my head, trying to think about what to say, but nothing feels right.

By the time I make it to the orchard, the sky has clouded over, blocking the sun and making my mood feel gloomier than before. I wipe my hands on my pants, feeling my palms sweat with nerves. The irony is not lost on me that I've faced down terrorists, and yet this woman scares the shit out of me.

They must sense me because they both look up as I draw near. Ev stands and offers Avery his hand, helping her up. She watches me warily, but E's expression is blank.

I stop a few feet from them and slide my hands into my pockets. "Can we talk?"

Ev looks from me to Avery, waiting for her to decide. If I didn't feel like he was competition, I'd be impressed with how he doesn't railroad her into doing what he thinks is best and lets her figure her own shit out. It's just one more point for him.

Evander one, Hawk zero.

"I'll be fine, Ev."

"Alright. I'm going to head back to the main house and wait for you."

"I'll make sure she gets there safely," I tell him.

He nods before giving Avery a squeeze and walking away. We both watch him leave before I point to the rock they were both just sitting on.

"Can we sit?"

"Oh, yeah. Sure."

I look out over the orchard, wondering when the last time I came out here was.

"They don't have places like this back home."

"Even living here, it's sometimes hard to remember to stop and enjoy it."

I look at her. "Sometimes we don't appreciate what we have until it's gone."

She blushes and looks away.

"I'm sorry, you know. About everything. I know you'll probably never forgive us, but I'd like a chance to tell you my side. I'm not going to make excuses. I just want you to have the whole story."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

She looks at me and nods. "Talk to me. Make me understand."

It's my turn to look away. I lean forward, my arms resting on my knees. "My father was a hard man. Brutal, actually. And he had no problem beating me and my mom into submission."

She reaches out and grasps my wrists.

There is no love lost between Avery and my mother. Lord knows Avery tried to win her over, but as far as my mom is concerned, there is only room in my life for one woman, and that's her.

"She was with my father up until the day he died and it was a bone of

contention between us. I couldn't understand how she could stay, if not for all the shit he did to her, then because of the way he had once terrorized me. It wasn't until I was older, and I'd seen the things I'd seen both domestic and abroad, that I realized leaving was the easy part. It was what came after that stopped her." I twist my hand and link my fingers with hers.

"She had no money, no skills outside of being a housewife, and her self-esteem was in the toilet. Her family had disowned her years ago and all of her friends moved on after they had been alienated by my dad. Then there was the fear. The fear of what he would do if he caught her leaving. The fear of what he would do if she was successful leaving and he had to hunt her down and drag her back again. I honestly believe if he was still alive, she'd still be with him. Unless of course he killed her first. When he died, it was like he took parts of her with him. He didn't need to beat on her anymore. She was already broken and over the years, she gradually declined. I moved her into an assisted living facility last year when she started having issues. Little things at first like leaving candles burning and forgetting the stove was on. But things escalated quickly.

The last few times I've visited, she's was in another world. One where my father is alive and she's blissfully happy. She barely remembers me, doesn't remember anything he put us through, and yet..."

I swallow and squeeze her hand.

"She's happy." Avery finishes for me. "She's created a reality where she gets to live out her happily ever after."

I nod. That's exactly it.

"When Creed told me about you, I'll admit I was skeptical. I figured when you found out that we were a package deal, you'd run. But you surprised me, and after the first date, I was as invested as he was," I tell her, needing her to know.

"I knew the only way Creed could stay in the country was for him to get married. And I supported my friend. I didn't want him to be deported when he was one of the few people I trusted with my life. And I cared for you. A lot. And as the years rolled by, the guilt grew because all I could think about was how we tricked you.

"That day you heard me tell Creed that I loved you, I wanted it to be true. You meant something to me, but it wasn't love. It couldn't be. Love to me was this ugly, toxic thing that turned my father into my monster and my mother into a ghost. To me love was a ridiculous notion anyway. And then

you were gone. And I realized too late that there were other kinds of love than the type that consumed my parents. I realized that what I felt for you went beyond just caring about someone. You broke my heart, Avery, before I even really figured out how to use it, but if you hadn't, I might never have figured out I loved you all along."

"Why didn't you come looking for me? I think that's what hurt more than anything—that neither of you fought for me."

"I think we both knew we didn't deserve you."

"Shouldn't I get to decide what I deserve?"

I look at her and bring her hand to my lips, kissing the back of it softly. "If you hadn't left, I'd still have my head up my ass. I had the emotional capacity of an orange. When you were gone, I couldn't shut out what I was feeling. And what I was feeling was out of control. You got through to me in a way that nobody else could, but it left me feeling raw and exposed and, I'll admit, a little bitter. How dare you make me fall in love with you just to rip it all away?"

She huffs, making me grin.

"I didn't say it was logical."

"Thank you for being honest with me, but I'm not sure where we go from here. Having all the answers doesn't wipe away the pain I felt. It brings clarity, but not forgiveness. Trust me, I don't want to be mad at you forever. But I still grieved you, grieved us, and all we lost. I moved on from denial and anger to bargaining before depression hit me pretty hard. The day in the diner, I was playing with my wedding rings, feeling sorry for myself, before everything turned to crap. All that was left was acceptance, and then maybe I could move on. And then you spoke to me, and I was right back at the beginning."

"I'm so sorry for the things I said to you at the hospital. You didn't deserve that. I wanted you to feel a fraction of the pain I was feeling."

"I think the bullet guaranteed that." She rolls her eyes, making me chuckle.

"Smart ass."

We sit quietly for a while, her hand still in mine. I look at her once more. "So, what happens next?"

"I don't know, Hawk. I really don't."

"What's going on with you and Ev?" The question sips out before I can stop it.

She tenses and tries to pull her hand free, but I hold on tighter. “That is none of your business.”

“As long as we’re still married, it is.”

“Then maybe it’s time we got a divorce.” She could have shot me point-blank and it would have hurt less.

“Is that what you want?” Jesus, is that my voice? I sound as if I’ve been gargling with glass.

She looks at me, her eyes glassy with unshed tears. “I want arms to hold me when I sleep, hands to help me up when I fall, fingers that stroke through my future daughter’s hair. I want a house with a yard and dog and—”

I cover her mouth with mine, sipping gently at her lips. I wait for her to give in before pulling away, not wanting to push my luck.

“I want those things too. I want all those things, but only with you.”

A tear falls, followed by another and another. I brush them away with my thumb and swallow around the lump in my throat.

“But it’s not me you see in that future, is it?” I shift to stand up, but she holds my hand tighter.

“It’s not just you I see, Hawk. That’s the problem.”

“Why? If you can forgive me, you can forgive Creed, right?”

She frowns before pulling her hand free and crossing her arms. “I never said I forgave you. Not yet, anyway. And I wasn’t talking about Creed. Me and him are a whole separate thing. He has his own apologies to make.”

It takes me a second to realize who she’s talking about. “Evander. You love him?”

“It’s too soon. But I feel something for him—something that’s getting harder and harder to deny,” she quietly admits.

I don’t have a fucking clue what to say to that. I watch as she stands and brushes off her pants.

“If there was no me and Creed, would you...?” I can’t even bring myself to say it, but I have to know just how deep her feelings for Ev are.

“In a heartbeat. But there is a you and Creed, and the pieces of me I would’ve given to Evander already belong to you.”

She walks away, leaving me feeling both ecstatic and fucking nervous. I need to talk to Creed. Need him to come up with a plan with me before we lose our wife forever.

* * *

I follow Avery until she reaches the main house, then veer off and head back to my place. Creed is up and eating a bowl of cereal when I walk in.

“Where did you disappear to? I knocked to see if you wanted to come for a run, but you were already gone.”

“I saw Ev and Avery head to the orchard, so I followed them. I wanted to talk to Avery alone.”

“And? How’d it go?”

I pull out a chair and sit down beside him. “It was rough but needed.”

“She listened to you?”

“Yeah. I think she’s ready to hear us out. But you have to understand, Creed, hearing us out and forgiving us are two very different things.”

“You think I don’t know that? And I made things a million times harder than they needed to be. But hey, don’t I always?”

“Well, if you’re done with the pity party, I think you should go talk to her. You need to fix this mess, or we’ll lose her.”

“Yes, *Mom*. I know that. I just don’t have any fucking clue how to fix it. I don’t know what to say to her.”

“Just tell her the truth.”

“She knows the truth. She knows I married her for my green card,” he snaps, standing up and tossing his bowl in the sink.

“And yet, out of the two of us, your love for her was never questioned.”

He turns to look at me with a frown.

“You might’ve seen her as your ticket to staying in the US when you first laid eyes on her, but she quickly became more than that, and you know it.”

“I do, but she doesn’t.”

“Then tell her.”

Frustrated, he runs his hand through his hair. “What’s the point? She’ll never take us back.”

“Then step aside, Creed, because E is more than ready to take your spot.”

“The fuck he is. Avery is my wife.”

“Our wife. But can we really blame her for wanting to move on?”

“Yes, because I didn’t. I waited.” He hits his chest.

I wince, knowing I’m the only one who crossed that line, though I did think I’d never see her again.

“She likes him a lot. We could force the issue and make him stay away from her. And the guys would back us,” I tell him quietly.

“Why do I sense a *but* here?”

“But we’ll push her further away too. Maybe this time we’ll push her too far. She cares about him. We need to either adapt or walk away.”

“Adapt how?”

“Ev doesn’t have a partner.”

“Yeah, and?”

I stare at him, waiting for him to see through his anger.

His eyes widen a fraction before he laughs. “You want him to join us?”

“Why not?”

He opens his mouth to shut me down but then snaps it closed.

“She likes him a whole fucking lot more than she likes us right now. He might be the bridge that heals the gap between us all.”

He looks thoughtful for a minute. I stand up, walk over to him, and place my hand on his shoulder. “She loves us, but what was once this beautiful path laid out before her became tangled with thorns. I think she needs E to cut through the crap to lead her back to us.”

“Fuck, you sound like a fortune cookie.” He sighs. “I need to run first. I need to clear my head before I talk to her.”

“Alright. Text me when you’re ready, and I’ll bring her over.” I slap his shoulder and leave him to it, heading back out and over to the main house.

When I walk in, I scope out the room and find E standing just in front of Avery as they face off against Oz. I can see Astrid and Salem in the kitchen, looking on warily, while Slade leans against the counter, watching the interaction with a frown.

“What’s going on?” I step up beside Avery and place my hand on the small of her back, making her tense for a second before she relaxes.

Ev looks back at me, standing next to Avery, before turning back to Oz. “Oz thinks it might be better if Avery stays home.”

“She is home.”

Avery jolts at that before looking up at me.

“He means at my place since that’s where she’s sleeping,” Ev states.

I look at him and realize he’s not trying to be a dick, he’s just stating facts. I frown at Oz. “Why?”

He nods to Astrid and Salem.

“You’re worried Salem and Astrid will upset her?”

“No, of course not,” Oz growls.

“Then what’s your fucking problem?” I snap, frustrated, just as Greg walks into the kitchen with Zig.

“We haven’t talked to them yet.”

“Talk to them about what?”

“Oz?” Zig calls his brother. “What’s going on?”

“We haven’t spoken to the girls about what’s been going on yet.”

“Yeah, I know. We’re doing it today.”

“I just don’t want Avery to say something without meaning to.”

Zig cocks his brow. “Did you forget what she does for a living? She’s not going to let information slip out.”

“We don’t know that. I don’t want Salem upset. It’s not good for the baby.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. You know what else isn’t good for the baby? Getting put away for murder, which is exactly what’s going to happen if you don’t stop treating me like I’m made of fucking glass.” Salem tosses the towel she was holding onto the counter and crosses her arms.

“All you had to do was say, ‘We haven’t told Salem and Astrid anything yet, so keep it to yourself,’” Avery tells Oz quietly, gaining everyone’s attention.

Oz sighs and rubs his hand over his face. “Do I look like I’m thinking rationally, Avery? Is this the face of a cool, calm, and collected individual?”

“No, it’s the face of an asshole, which is unfortunate for Zig because he has the same one. What’s your point?”

“That was mean,” he pouts before he tips his head up to the ceiling and blows out a breath. Eventually, he drops his head back down and stares at Avery. “Logically, I knew you wouldn’t say anything. I just—”

“Logic goes out of the window when your woman and baby are involved,” she answers for him.

“Yeah.” He sighs, then steps forward. “I’m a dick.”

“I know,” she replies, not giving him an inch. Zig grins, and I can hear the girls laughing in the kitchen, but I don’t take my eyes off Oz.

“But lucky for you, you’re not the biggest asshole in the room, so I forgive you.”

I raise my hand. “That would be me, right?”

Avery sighs. “Actually, I was talking about Slade, but now that you mention it…”

This time, even Slade cracks a smile.

“Alright, crisis averted. Nobody is going to spill secrets because our men are going to fill us in over lunch, aren’t they?” Astrid claps her hands.

“Babe...” Slade starts, but Astrid glares at him.

“Do you want to sleep on the sofa tonight, *babe*?”

He raises his hands in surrender.

“That’s what I thought. So, Avery, right? Nice to meet you. Come tell me all the embarrassing stories about these idiots you can think of.”

A collective groan goes up as Avery relaxes and walks toward the kitchen. “Well, there was this one time Oz went to town with a giant dick drawn on his face that he was completely unaware of...”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Avery

I liked Salem and Astrid. I wasn't sure what to expect, but they were both super sweet, which surprised me. I can only imagine what they were told about me.

I look around at all the guys laughing and joking before turning back to Salem, who seems to have morphed into the pioneer woman before my eyes. "Are you sure I can't help?"

"No, I've got it. I swear cooking is the only damn thing these guys will let me do anymore," Salem grumbles.

Astrid looks at me and grins. "Apparently, being pregnant makes alpha men go into overdrive."

"She's not kidding. Watch this." Salem coughs before speaking louder. "I'm just going to get the casserole out of the oven." Heads swivel in our direction before Jagger, who joined us earlier along with Wilder, jumps to his feet and hurries over, nudging Salem out of the way.

"I've got it."

Salem rolls her eyes.

I cover my grin with my hand. Jagger carries the casserole over to the table. As soon as he's gone, the three of us look at each other before dissolving into fits of laughter.

"How's your shoulder?" Salem asks.

I realize I'm rubbing it. Astrid tenses beside me as the room quiets. "It's good, thanks."

"I could—"

"I think the bacon's done, Salem." Zig walks into the kitchen and leans against the counter, effectively putting himself between me and Salem.

"Oh, shoot." She whirls around as I look up at Zig in confusion. He stares at me, offering no explanation. I sigh and look away.

"Why don't we go sit down at the table since the food is almost done?" Ev walks over and offers me his hand. I take it and let him lead me over to the table before sitting on the chair that Hawk pulls out for me. Hawk then sits on my left and E on my right as everyone else starts to fill up the empty chairs.

“Should we wait for the others?”

“Crew’s gone to visit his grandmother, and James flew out last night to visit his grandkids,” Wilder answers as he sits.

“Creed went for a run,” Hawk adds.

“Okay, should we save Creed and Crew some food, though?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got them,” Salem calls from the kitchen.

“Nobody misses out on food when Salem is here. She’s like a mother hen,” Greg teases.

“You guys are lucky then.”

Nobody knows what to say to that, so it’s quiet as everyone serves themselves.

Ev grabs my plate. “Want me to fix you a plate?”

“Sure, thanks.”

“Anything you don’t like?”

“Mushrooms,” Hawk says before I can reply.

“You remember that?” I look at him.

“I remember everything.”

“No mushrooms then,” Ev says as he adds a little of everything else to my plate before setting it down in front of me, and I dig in.

As we all eat, appreciative moans and groans are expressed around the table.

“This is delicious, Salem. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. So, what’s the big secret everyone is hiding from me and Astrid?”

When nobody volunteers any information, Salem looks at me. “Last I heard, you were in the hospital after saving Creed’s life. Thank you for that, by the way. Losing him... it would have left a huge hole in our family,” she says with tears in her eyes.

I bite my lip and look away because, once upon a time, I was part of this family too.

“Next thing I’m being told is you’re staying here for a little while, but not with Creed or Hawk, but Evander. A man I didn’t think you even knew.”

“Salem,” Ev says sharply.

Salem frowns before her eyes widen. “Crap, I didn’t mean it to sound like that. I just meant he was the only one here you don’t know, so why him when...” her voice drifts off as if she’s answered her own question. And I guess, in a way, she has.

“She’s staying with Ev because he was the only one, well, minus Greg, who didn’t treat her like shit. Nobody else made her feel welcome, and me and Creed were dicks to her.” Hawk sighs.

“Ooh, I know what that’s like,” Astrid says, earning a look from Slade.

“What? It’s true.”

“I said I was sorry,” he snaps at her.

She rolls her eyes. “And I forgave you. But your *sorry* didn’t magically rewrite history. Why do men think that’s a thing?” she finishes.

“Did you apologize?” Salem asks Hawk as I try to sink farther down into the chair.

“Yeah, but I think it’s going to take more than *I’m sorry* to earn Avery’s forgiveness.”

Salem frowns, looking between me and Hawk. “Okay, I’m clearly missing a lot here. You left them, right? That’s what they said—that you left and never came back.” I flinch, but I don’t look away from her.

“There’s more to the story. Some we didn’t know, and some stuff—” Hawk coughs to clear his throat, but then shuts up.

“I found out that Creed married me for his green card and that Hawk didn’t love me at all,” I finish for him.

Salem’s eyes are as wide as her mouth now.

Astrid glares at Hawk. “What in the actual fuck?”

“Astrid—” Jagger touches her wrist, but she shakes him off.

“No. I felt sorry for them. And you all made it sound like it was her fault,” she says, looking around the table.

“I’m so disappointed in you right now,” she tells Hawk. And now it’s my turn to be shocked. I never expected them to take my side.

“All this time, I thought she left for no reason. That was a dickish thing to do.”

Hawk defends himself. “We didn’t know she’d overheard us talking.”

“Oh, well, why didn’t you say you were talking behind her back? That would have made things so much better. I’m not surprised she left. I wouldn’t have forgiven you either. Wait... if you didn’t know she overheard you, then why did you think she left you?”

Hawk shrugs.

“What does that mean?” She looks at me. “What did you tell them? Not that you owed them a damn thing.”

“I didn’t tell them anything. I never got the chance.”

“I’m sorry, I’m really confused.”

Salem looks to Zig for help, but it’s Hawk that replies. “We didn’t go after her. We just let her go.”

“You didn’t go after her? Like at all?” Astrid looks from Hawk to Jagger and Slade. “And I thought you guys were assholes, but at least you came after me.”

“It wasn’t all their fault. I never planned on leaving. Even as mad and heartbroken as I was, I couldn’t imagine my life without them. I’d already lost everyone I ever cared about. I couldn’t do it again because I wouldn’t just be losing Creed and Hawk, I’d be losing...” my voice cracks, so I reach for my glass and take a sip.

“Your found family,” Salem whispers.

I nod, glad she understands that part at least. “Of course, I lost them anyway when I trusted the wrong person.”

“What happened?”

“Cooper happened,” I reply softly. Then, with a nod from Zig, I tell them everything I already told the guys. By the time I’m finished, Salem has tears running down her face, and Astrid looks stunned.

“I’m... I don’t even know what to say. You came to warn us?” she croaks as Zig wraps his arm around her and Oz grabs the box of tissues off the counter.

“I mean, I didn’t know it was you. I just knew it was someone at Apex. And to be fair, there is still a chance it’s not you,” I add, though it seems unlikely at this point.

“So, you”—Astrid looks around before turning back to me—“know what we can do?”

“Yes. I mean I saw a story on the news about you being psychic, you’re not exactly hiding what you can do like Salem, which is smart by the way, but I know what you actually are. You’re a harbinger, and Salem is a healer.” Astrid flinches at my words. “Don’t be ashamed of what you can do. From what I heard, Salem and her baby would already be dead if it wasn’t for you and your gift. It takes someone with unimaginable strength and courage to carry the weight of death on their shoulders and still find a way to live.”

“She’s right,” Slade says softly. “You’re the strongest person I know.”

“You have to say that because you like blow jobs,” she mumbles, making everyone laugh.

“I sure fucking do,” Slade states with a smirk.

“Everyone heard Slade say I was right, right?” I whisper loudly.

Slade looks at me, shaking his head.

I look at Salem, and my hand goes to my mouth. “Oh! I just realized why everyone got weird earlier when you mentioned my shoulder. They were worried about you healing me. Does it hurt you?”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle.” She ignores Zig’s snort of disbelief. “It’s more to do with not knowing the effect it would have on the baby.”

“Oh. Well, I haven’t met another healer, but most babies aren’t affected by their mother’s gifts. Still, I understand you not wanting to risk it.”

She grumbles something under her breath, but I don’t catch it.

Astrid leans forward a little and catches my attention. “Your seer, she doesn’t just see death?”

“No. Thankfully.”

“Oh, thank God. I wouldn’t wish that on a child. I’m glad for her,” she replies softly. And I smile.

“So,” Salem starts, and I look at her. “You’re like us.”

I nod.

“You can hear lies.”

“Yes.”

She nods, biting her lip. I almost laugh at how easy she is to read, but I keep it in check, dropping my guard and waiting for her to test me. It doesn’t take long. “I cheated on my history test in the eighth grade.”

I laugh. “You little rebel, you. Truth.”

“My favorite cookie is oatmeal raisin,” she shouts.

I shake my head. “Liar.”

“It was Astrid that reversed into Zig’s truck.”

“Lie.”

“Damn, that’s a useful skill to have.”

The smile falls from my face before her eyes move from me to Hawk.

“Oh, Avery, I’m sorry. That was a stupid thing for me to say.”

“It’s okay.”

“So, Salem wasn’t the first gifted person you guys met. Avery was. That’s one hell of a coincidence,” Astrid states, looking at Zig.

“Wait, this means you all rescuing Salem and accidentally stumbling onto her gift was all a lie?” Astrid gasps.

“Cooper knew who Salem was all along. Yeah, we figured that out before Avery came back.” Oz nods.

“But... I thought he betrayed you because his wife was dying, and I was the only shot she had. This would mean that...” Salem swallows and looks around.

“That he fucked us over long before Kay got sick,” Greg says softly.

“Fuck, I’m sorry,” Salem whispers.

“Don’t apologize for him. He doesn’t deserve it. We made excuses for him because of Kay, but there is no excuse for what he did to Avery. She told him what she could do because she trusted him, and his first instinct was to turn her over. Fuck that and fuck him,” Slade snaps.

I frown, thinking over his words, before something dawns on me rather belatedly. “He knew.”

“Who knew what?” Hawk asks as I feel my face pale. Ev reaches for me.

“What’s wrong, Avery?”

“He told them I was gifted, but how did he know who they were? How did he know who to report to?”

Zig looks at me and curses up a blue streak. “He didn’t find out about it by accident. Motherfucker was part of it. Fuck. Ev, I need you to do some digging. Dig as deep as you can go without getting caught. Find out everything you can about Cooper since the moment he took his first breath. I know you looked before, but I want you to specifically look for ties he had before Avery entered our lives.”

Hawk jumps up and starts pacing. I can see everyone getting even more pissed as they think things through. “Jesus fuck, this is on me and Creed. If we’d never brought you here, you would’ve been safe.” Hawk looks ravaged.

“Don’t. I might have been living a lie, but your lies were my truth. Every kiss, every *I love you*, I meant from the bottom of my soul. Your mistake was my reason for getting up in the morning. And even though it didn’t last, I wouldn’t change it for all the safety in the world.”

“You mean that?”

My head whips around at the sound of Creed’s voice. I find him standing in the doorway, eyes blazing, his focus completely on me.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

“Can we talk?” he asks softly, the room as quiet now as it was loud only a moment ago.

“Not to sound like a dick, Creed, and I get this is important, but you missed a bunch of shit that you should probably know about first,” Zig jumps in.

“It can wait. This is more important.”

Zig opens his mouth, about to argue, but Creed shakes his head at him. “Avery can fill me in on anything pressing. Avery?” Creed holds his hand out to me.

After glancing around the table, I stand up and bite my lip. I look down at E, who gives me a sad smile that I don’t have time to analyze before I make my way over to Creed and slip my hand into his. I let him lead me outside, neither of us talking as he takes me to what I’m guessing is his place.

He opens the door and lets me inside. I take a quick look around and see it’s the same layout as E’s place, but where his is all whites and creams, this place is more muted with grays and blues. He has a large sectional that’s navy blue and a large television opposite that E doesn’t. I frown, thinking about that. You’d think, as techy as E is, he’d have a TV that would rival anyone else’s.

“You’re frowning.”

“I’m wondering why Ev doesn’t have a television.”

Creed chuckles. “I’m guessing you haven’t seen his den?”

“Huh?”

“Ev doesn’t have a roommate like the rest of us, so his spare room has been converted into a gamer’s paradise.”

“Oh.” I need to snoop around when I get back.

I look over at Creed, who is now the one frowning. “What?”

“I just realized that you’re not sleeping in Ev’s spare room.”

My mouth shuts at that. This already tense situation just became a whole lot more tense.

His hands fist at his sides as if trying to rein himself back in. “Did you sleep with him?”

I take a step away, wondering if this was a bad idea. “Yes, we share a bed.”

“But did you fuck him?” His voice is low and gruff, like each word is being painfully ripped from him.

“Is this really what you want to do?”

“Did you fuck him?” His voice is a snarl now, but he doesn’t come any closer.

“No, I haven’t fucked him,” I whisper back. My anger demands my pound of flesh, but the pain in his voice hurts me far more than I care to admit.

He takes a step toward me, and I back up until I feel the sofa behind my legs stopping me from going any farther. His hand cups my cheek while the other slides over my hip, his nose skimming mine as he stares into my eyes.

“I haven’t touched another woman since the day in the coffee shop. It was my penance to pay, but it was so much more than that. Once I had you, there was no going back. No other woman could compete. I might have asked you to marry me for all the wrong reasons, but I meant every fucking word of my vows. I haven’t broken them in the whole time you’ve been gone, and I won’t even if you walk out that door and I never see you again. It doesn’t matter if you don’t want me anymore, Avery. I’ll always be yours.”

Truth.

Tears run down my face, but I don’t bother trying to wipe them away. “I haven’t had sex with anyone else, but…”

He groans like he’s in pain, his forehead pressing against mine. “But you want to.”

“I locked down every emotion after we fell apart. I couldn’t let myself feel because if I opened myself up to the pain, I knew I’d never recover from it. Only I couldn’t hold it all back for long. Once the floodgates opened, it was like a tsunami. That first year, I can barely remember anything. The second year, I managed to fall back into a routine. I’d get up, get dressed, eat when I remembered, go to work, come home, shower, and sleep before repeating it all over again the next day. I wasn’t numb anymore, but I felt hollow and raw. The only time I ever allowed myself to feel anything was when I was with the kids I worked with.”

I blow out a breath before I continue, knowing I’m going to hurt him, but I won’t lie to him. “I didn’t stay single because of you or Hawk. I did it because the thought of opening myself up to another man made me feel violently sick.”

He jolts at my words, his hand on my hip squeezing a little harder.

“When I came back, I would sit in the diner watching you both, trying to find the courage to approach you. I’d spin the wedding rings on my chain, trying to find strength, but you can’t find strength in something that never held any power.”

“The fuck they didn’t.” He pulls back and raises his hand, showing me his wedding band.

I swallow hard. “That wasn’t there before.”

“Like you, I wore it around my neck.”

Truth.

I don't know what the hell to say to that. I haven't worn mine since that day in the diner.

"Coming here with the information I did, I had to brace myself. All I knew was that someone here was pregnant and that the baby was in danger. In reality, I knew it could be anyone, but my tortured heart was trying to prepare itself for the fact that you could have a woman and a baby on the way," I admit out loud for the first time.

"Sitting in the diner each morning, I swore I'd suck it up and approach, but thinking and doing are two very different things."

"God, no, never. If I can't have you, I don't want anyone."

Truth.

I choke out a sob, my hands fisting his shirt. "I was shot. And the men I loved reminded me who they really were, and something in me just broke. Call it hope, call it faith—I don't know. But after the things you both said to me while I was lying in a hospital bed after having a bullet with your name on it dug out of my shoulder, I knew I was done."

I grip him tighter and brace myself. He feels my body tense and pulls back just enough to look down at me. "And then there was Evander. Instead of tearing me apart, he tried to put me back together again. He stood up for me, stood against all of you to keep me safe, and he never gave up on me. Nobody has ever done that before. Not even you and Hawk."

A tear slips free, so I take a deep breath and soldier on. "I haven't had sex with him. We haven't crossed that line. But the line blurs every time I'm with him."

"Have you kissed him?" His voice is empty of any emotion.

I can't read him, but I answer anyway. "Yes."

He hisses, but instead of pulling away, he yanks me closer. "Does he kiss you like this?"

Before I can process what he said, his lips are on mine, firm and demanding. And I'm lost. I open for him, losing myself in the moment before he pulls back. His eyes glitter with something that makes me want to slap him.

"No. He kisses me like he loves me, not like he has a point to prove."

My words hit home, and he sucks in a shocked breath. "No."

"No, what? No, he can't love me because you think I'm yours?" I snap, feeling stupid and small.

“No. I wasn’t kissing you to prove a point. I was kissing you because I need you to remember what it’s like to love me. I need you to let me love you back. I know I don’t deserve it. I’ll spend forever making it up to you, but I need you to remember that not everything we had was bad. I fucked up. God, me and Hawk, we destroyed the one good thing we ever had because of our hang-ups, but don’t let our mistakes wipe out all the good memories we made together.”

“You tarnished them. Every happy memory leaves me questioning whether it was all just a lie. Was it all a trick to get me where you wanted me?”

He growls again, his hand sliding into my hair. “The second you let me slip inside you, I knew I was keeping you forever. Even if I got kicked out of the country and my citizenship was denied, I was taking you with me. Our wedding was for the green card, but our marriage was all for us. I want a lifetime with you. I always did. I just need you to forgive me.”

Truth.

I’m full-on crying now. I couldn’t say anything, even if I tried.

But he’s right. If I take away the last moments of our relationship, I was the happiest I’ve ever been when I was with them. And right now, I don’t know how to reconcile that with the hate I’ve let eat away at me.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Creed

I hold on to her as she cries into my shirt, afraid to let her go in case this is the last time she lets me touch her. When her weight presses more heavily into me, I scoop her up and move to sit on the sofa with her in my lap, my arms wrapped tightly around her.

She lifts her head. Her eyes are red, her cheeks damp, and her lips puffy, yet she's never looked as beautiful to me as she does right now.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to fall apart."

"Don't be. I think it's been a long time coming," I tell her, brushing my thumb across her cheeks, wiping away the remnants of her tears.

Looking into my eyes, she's quiet. Her brows furrowed.

"Tell me what's going on in that head of yours."

"I would if I could make sense of it all." She tries to slide off me, but I grip her tighter.

"Creed."

"Just let me hold you for a little while longer."

"You act like I'm going to disappear."

"Aren't you?"

She blows out a frustrated breath and glares at me.

"It wasn't my fault the first time I disappeared."

"No, it wasn't. It was mine for not searching for you. But that will never happen again. If you leave, I'll follow."

"It's not the same, Creed. We're different people now than we were back then."

"Good. Maybe we can learn from our mistakes this time."

"I can't—" She shakes her head, but I lean down and capture her mouth with mine. Kissing her slowly before pulling back.

"You can. You're just scared. I get it. I am too. But if I let you go now, I'll regret it for the rest of my life."

"And if I let you back in and you hurt me again, I'll hate myself more than I already do."

"Please don't ask me to say goodbye. I'll give you anything but that."

"I don't want to hurt you. Believe it or not, I don't like seeing you and

Hawk in pain because of me, but I don't know how to untangle everything. And now there's E, and I don't want to give him up on a what-if."

"So, don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't give him up." I swallow down any anger and jealousy I feel toward the man. I know right now that if I force her to choose, she'll choose him. Hawk's right. To save the tattered bond between the three of us, we need Evander.

"Just don't give us up either. While you're getting to know Ev, do the same with me and Hawk. Get to know us all over again, with no secrets or lies between us."

"I don't understand. How will that help? In the end, someone will get hurt because I can't have you all."

"Why? Who said you can't?"

Her mouth snaps shut as she stares at me in shock. I sit quietly as the wheels in her brain turn, hoping and praying she agrees to this.

"Are you saying date all of you?"

"I'm saying, I'd rather share you than lose you. I want you to be happy. I'm so sick of being the reason you cry. For once, I want to be the reason you smile."

And she does that now. It's small and a little shaky, but it's genuine, and something about it loosens the knot in my chest. There are no promises exchanged between us, no commitments set in stone, but a truce has been called. And with it, the potential for a whole new chapter in our story.

"Let's talk about something else for a minute. Fill me in on what I missed before."

She moves to stand, and this time, I let her. Getting up, I adjust myself, making her blush and look away.

"Sorry, but I can't be held responsible for my dick's actions. He can't control himself when he's around you." She giggles as we make our way to the kitchen. "Coffee?"

"Yes, please."

"Alright, I'll make the coffee while you tell me what it is I need to know."

And she does, filling me in on what I missed.

"He was already working for them. That son of a fucking bitch." I interrupt her.

“And that’s what everyone was upset about when you walked in.”

“Evander needs to dig into his financial—”

“Zig already has him on it. I think everyone is just having a hard time processing it all.”

“The man was a traitor. We knew that.”

“You knew he turned on you to save his wife’s life. You hate him, but a part of you can understand why he did what he did.”

And she’s right. As much as I despise everything Coop did, a part of me questioned what I would have done in his place. If Avery was facing a death sentence and I knew I could save her, would I have done the same thing?

“Now, though, the man who everyone thought at his core had noble intentions turns out to just be a bad guy. It’s like you have to mourn him all over again.”

I groan and scrub my hand over my face. I want to dig Cooper up just so I can strangle the fucker.

“There is something else, though, something I didn’t get to say earlier because you walked in. I think you should dig into the cases you guys took that involved Cooper.”

“Jesus. You think he was selling us out.”

“I think it’s possible he was using you guys to help him without you realizing it. I know E’s going to be busy, but...”

Her voice drifts off as I nod. “No, you’re right. This is important. I’m not as good with the computer stuff as Ev, but I can hold my own. So can Greg and Wilder.”

“I can help, too, if you want. I might recognize names and places.”

“I’ll talk to Zig, but I don’t think he’ll have a problem with it,” I tell her. This is such a fucking mess. “We’d better head back over to the main house and tell them your suspicions.”

“I feel like I’m always the bearer of bad news.”

“I’d rather know what we’re dealing with than fly blindly into trouble. Come on, bring your coffee with you.” She grabs it as I move around the counter and head to the door, letting her out before locking up. I offer her my free hand and feel myself relax when she takes it.

We walk back in silence, each of us lost in thought. When we reach the doors, I open them, and we’re bombarded with noise. Noise that quiets immediately when everyone sees me and Avery holding hands.

“Where’s Ev?”

“In the war room with Greg, digging into Cooper,” Zig answers, heading toward us.

“You okay?” he asks Avery, who nods.

“Avery pointed something out that we haven’t thought about.”

“What’s that?”

“The cases that Cooper was involved in. She thinks we need to look into them.”

Zig turn to Avery. His words come out in a snarl. “You think he was using us to track potential gifted people?”

“It’s possible. Or he could have been using you to keep other people away from them. I don’t know. It’s all just a theory.”

Zig wipes his hand down his face.

“I can look into it,” I say, and Zig looks at me. “Me, Greg, and Wilder are good enough on a computer to at least make a start. And Avery has offered to help—checking names, dates, and locations to see if she recognizes anything.”

“Do it. I feel like we’re missing something here, and it’s pissing me off. Thank you, Avery. Your help would be great. We really appreciate it.”

“I don’t mind, Zig. I feel the same way, like it’s right there, but I just can’t put my finger on it.”

“We’ll figure it out. Thanks to you, we already have more now than we did yesterday.”

Hawk walks over and steps in front of Avery, tipping her chin up so he can look into her eyes. “You good?”

She blows out a breath before nodding. “I’m good.”

Hawk nods and steps back.

“Zig, will you take Avery to Ev? I need to talk to Hawk for a minute.”

“Sure, no problem.”

Avery looks at me, then at Hawk, understanding dawning on her face.

“Go with Zig. I’ll be there soon.” I kiss her forehead before letting go of her hand.

“I...okay.” She hesitates for a second before lifting up onto her toes and pressing a kiss on my cheek. Smiling at the shocked look on my face, she follows Zig out of the room.

I watch until they disappear, then motion to Hawk to step away from the others, who are eavesdropping like a bunch of nosey bitches.

“What is it?”

“You were right.”

“Of course I was. What was I right about again?”

“Evander.”

He waits until I say more. I look around to make sure the others can't hear us before continuing. “She still loves us, but she feels something for Ev. If I force her to give him up, I think she'll walk away from all of us.”

“I knew it.”

“I asked her to consider dating all three of us,” I blurt out, tensing while I wait for his reply.

“And she was open to it?”

“She didn't say no. In fact, it was the first real smile I've gotten from her in a while. I will say this, though: if we fuck this up, it's game over. The fact that she's willing to give us a shot after everything we did is a miracle in itself.”

“And you can handle them being together?”

I nod. “I watch her with you and don't get jealous. I just need to change my mindset. What about you?”

“I was the one who suggested it, remember? I just needed to know if you could handle this or if you'd walk away.”

“Walking away isn't an option. I'm not saying this is going to be smooth sailing, but what's the alternative? We stand by and watch while our wife moves on with someone else?”

“So, operation make Avery fall in love with us again is in full effect?”

“Damn straight. Now, let's go find her before she has a chance to freak out.” I slap Hawk's back, and we head to the war room.

Zig is still there when we enter, leaning over the laptop in front of Avery and pointing at something. Ev is working on his own computer, the image on his screen is mirrored on the wall in front of him for all of us to see. The only problem is with how fast the information is moving. Only Ev can understand it when it's like that.

Hawk walks over to Avery, but I head for Ev and Greg. “Have you found anything interesting yet?”

“A lot, but there's a bunch of shit to sift through,” Ev answers, his eyes never leaving the screen.

“Did Zig mention going through old case files?”

“Yeah, I'm pulling them up now.” He looks at me. “Wanna help? I'll throw them up on the other screen.”

“As long as you have them moving at normal human speed.”

He grins before nodding. I walk around him and wait.

“We found a deposit transferred into Cooper’s offshore account from the day after he took Avery back. It was made by a dummy company, but we’re running the name to see if it pops up again.”

The blank screen I’m standing in front of suddenly splits into three columns of information with our code names at the top.

“What do Ophis, Spithra, and Scorpius mean?”

I turn at the sound of Avery’s voice and see her looking at the screen in front of me. “They’re the code names we use in the field. Each of our active teams has them.”

“So, how come there are only three?”

“There’s not. But it’s easier to start with these because these teams are the ones with links to a gifted one,” Ev answers.

“Me and Oz are Ophis. Slade and Jagger are Spithra, and Hawk and Creed are Scorpius,” Zig tells Avery, and she nods.

“Makes sense. It’s not like you’re gonna accidentally say those names out loud or hear anyone else use them. They’re like a safe word, right?”

“What do you know about safe words, Avery?” Hawk asks her, his eyes blazing with heat, making her blush.

Zig laughs. “And that’s my cue to leave. Crew and Wilder have to fly out in an hour to help Nash and Hendrix with a case, but the rest of us are around to help. You just need to point us in the right direction, Ev.”

“How much longer will Nash and Hendrix be gone?”

“I’m not sure. They have a couple of active cases to wrap up, so they won’t be back until they’re done. One of the cases is personal.”

“Seems to be the norm these days.” Greg chuckles.

“What about heading over to Cooper’s old house? We haven’t been there since Kay died, but now might be a good time to see if he has anything hidden there that might help us.” Ev spins around and faces Zig.

“I’ll get Slade and Jagger to go over and search the place and keep you posted.”

Once he leaves, I go through the columns on the screen, focusing on the one titled Scorpius. I remember each and every case, and only a handful had input from Cooper. I take the iPad Ev gives me and start eliminating the cases I know for sure Cooper had no hand in—until I’m left with three.

“Hey, Avery, I’ve narrowed down mine and Hawk’s section to three jobs

that involved Cooper. If I pull up the details, do you want to see if anything looks familiar?”

“Sure.” She gets out of her seat and walks over to sit on the edge of the desk. I pull up the files on the iPad and hand it over.

“This one.” She moves two of the jobs off the screen so she can focus on just one. “It says here that Cooper was contacted by an anonymous source with information about an aid worker that was reported missing after a convoy delivering supplies to the clinic she was working at in...” She keeps reading, but I reply for her.

“Somalia. They couldn’t send in US soldiers and escalate the issue, so Hawk and I went in to find her.”

“And did you? It’s not in the file.”

I take the tablet from her and frown. Sure enough, the file has been altered, showing only that the case had been closed.

“Yeah, we did. She was being held by a group of al-Shabaab allies. We managed to get her out undetected. She was medevaced to a hospital in Germany,” Hawk states, walking over.

“But once we rescued her, we came back home. We had another case waiting for us. It was Cooper who accompanied her to Germany,” I add, remembering how I bitched on the flight back about needing a holiday.

“What was her name?” Avery looks at me while I think about it.

“Emily something. Hold on. Ev, can you recover the missing info from this file? I need the name of the hostage we rescued.”

“Sure, give me the case file number,” he shouts without looking up.

I read it out to him and then wait. It doesn’t take long before an image of a young brunette woman appears on the screen.

“Her name is Emma Snow. I’m tracking her details now, but there’s nothing since her time in—Fuck.”

“What?” I look at him a second before a death certificate appears on-screen. “Well, that explains that.”

“Not quite. Look at the date.” He points to the screen.

I do as he asks and growl when I see it. “That’s bullshit. That was the day before we rescued her.”

“And you definitely rescued the woman in the photo?” Avery asks.

“Positive, why?”

“Because I’ve seen her.”

My head whips around to look at her, and her eyes find mine.

“She works at the Division. She doesn’t talk to me. Actually, she doesn’t really acknowledge my existence. But I know of her because she is praised for the work she does with the victims we recover.”

“What kind of work?” Hawk asks. I wonder if, like me, he’s questioning if we saved someone who went on to torture others. If so, I’d find her again and kill her myself.

“The kind where she can see inside a body and tell exactly where and what the damage is.”

“What?” Ev frowns, finally looking up.

“She’s gifted. People call her Kara Zor-El.”

I stare at her, confused.

Ev huffs out a laugh. “Supergirl? Really?”

“She has x-ray vision. Are you really surprised?”

“X-ray vision?”

“Okay, well, not actually X-ray vision, more like she can sense what’s wrong and where. She’s pretty handy to have around when the kids are too scared to talk.”

“So, she’s stuck at the Division because of us?” I curse.

“Maybe,” Avery hedges. “But you did rescue her, and she has saved hundreds of lives since.”

“It doesn’t make it right,” Hawk tells her quietly.

“No, but it doesn’t make it wrong either.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Avery

I take the iPad from Creed and move on to the next file.

“What’s the deal with this one? It says you were hired to apprehend a soldier who had gone AWOL during a training mission. That’s not something that would normally be contracted out. That’s why they have military police—they like to deal with their own.”

“But their reach can only stretch so far. This guy, if I remember correctly, had dual citizenship. He fled the US to avoid being arrested,” Hawk answers.

“And let me guess, the country he went to was a non-expedite country?”

Creed nods. “China. He was born and lived there with his mother before moving to the US with his American father when he was three.”

“So, you both went to China to pick him up. You were lucky you weren’t caught. They aren’t known for being all that welcoming to our military personnel, even if they aren’t active soldiers anymore. Still, it’s an extreme move, sending you in, and a risk. Why do it?”

“He was accused of being a spy and selling state secrets to the Chinese,” Ev says.

“Did you find any proof of this?” I glance at him.

“Our mission was to detain him until a second covert team could take him home for questioning.” Hawk crosses his arms over his chest and frowns.

“It says his name is Fred Downey. Is that his real name?” I question.

“He has dozens of aliases, but that was the one on his birth certificate. Does his name ring any bells?” Ev asks.

I look over at him, then frown when I realize Greg has disappeared. I was so focused that I didn’t hear him leave. Where the heck did he go?

Ev answers my silent question. “He’s gone to get some drinks.”

“I’m sorry, the name doesn’t sound familiar. Do you have a photo?” Ev types on his laptop, and the man appears on the screen in his full uniform.

I narrow my eyes. There is something familiar about him, but I’m not sure why.

“You recognize him?”

“No. Maybe? I’m not sure. He might just have one of those faces. What year did this happen?”

A couple of taps on his laptop, and the information is up on the screen. I swallow and grip the edge of the desk. “That was before my time at the Division.”

“You sure?” Creed asks as I keep staring at the screen. “Something has you spooked.”

“What? Oh no, nothing like that. It’s just the date. It’s the same year my parents died.”

“Fuck. Sorry, Avery.” He quickly changes the subject. “What about the last file?”

I pull it up and look it over. “A security job. A start-up software company created some uber successful app. They were in talks with larger company about a possible takeover, but one of the parties had been getting death threats. You went in and kept guard while contracts were signed. Nothing jumps out at me.”

“MirrorCorp. I remember. A couple of college friends started a software company after graduating and came up with an app that exploded all over the internet. MirrorCorp wanted it and offered them a huge amount of money for it. There was some issue with an ex-colleague. I can’t remember all the details, but all parties walked away happy,” Creed responds.

“And Cooper’s involvement?”

Hawk answers this time. “He knew someone on the MirrorCorp board of directors. They asked for a favor.”

I look between them both, wondering if this was just a regular job after all and unconnected. “Ev, can you find out if anything happened to either party after the contracts were signed?”

“Yeah, hang on.”

“What do you see that I’m not?” Creed asks me.

“Nothing. It looks like a simple job. If anything, it’s a little too simple. You guys aren’t cheap, and it sounds to me that, given the threats, they could have just enlisted the help of the police. You said it was a favor. Did you do it for free?”

“Fuck no. If we did favors for everyone we knew, we’d be broke,” Hawk states, making me laugh.

“Alright, here we go.” Ev makes a clicking noise with his tongue as he scans the row of names in front of him before shaking his head. “Nothing stands out to me. The only people who have died since then are a seventy-five-year-old board member who suffered his third heart attack in as many

years and a nineteen-year-old receptionist who was shot and killed in a domestic violence attack. The boyfriend pleaded guilty and is currently serving a twenty-year sentence.”

“So, this case is a bust, then?” Hawk asks.

“Ev, when did the sale go through? The exact date,” I ask, something about it being too clean is bugging me. E hits a key, and the date pops up on screen. I suck in a sharp breath and think back.

I look at Creed, who is frowning at me. “Where was the meeting?” As soon as I say those words, his eyes widen.

“Downtown Austin.”

“Second Street, right?”

“What’s going on?” Hawk looks back and forth between us.

“After we wrapped up, Cooper sent me to get coffee for the three of us from his favorite little coffee shop. The one he used to frequent when he was stationed in Austin.”

“Yeah, I remember, it’s where you—Holy fuck!” Hawk curses.

“Where you what? Someone want to fill me in?” Ev asks.

“It’s the day we met. I ran into Avery at the coffee shop Cooper sent me to,” Creed tells him, his eyes on mine.

Ev jumps up, almost dropping his laptop. “The security detail was a front. Avery was the target. He knew about you all along.”

Hawk shakes his head. “It could all just be a coincidence.”

“There are dozens of coffee shops around there. Definitely a few closer that I would have happily stopped at if I hadn’t received a gift card for that specific coffee shop as part of my signing bonus that morning.” I take a step away from the desk and put the iPad down just as Greg walks into the room with a tray of coffees.

“What I miss?” He looks around the room. “I’m sensing it’s something significant.”

“Maybe,” Creed confirms, and E gives Greg a rundown of what we discovered.

“Okay, I’m confused,” Greg admits. “This sounds to me like you were wrong, and the people you work for did know you were gifted. But if that’s the case, then why didn’t you have a Penn Travis watching you?” he asks.

His words hit me like a sledgehammer.

Hawk reaches for me as I feel my legs turn to jelly and I stumble. “Wow, easy there, Avery.” Hawk lifts me into his lap and runs a soothing hand down

my back.

“Ev?” Ev gets down on his knees in front of me and tucks my hair behind my ear.

“What’s wrong, Avery?” He looks into my eyes. “You just thought of something, didn’t you?”

“Can you cross-reference my birth name against all of Fred Downey’s aliases?” I whisper, fighting to hold back my tears.

Hawk goes tense beneath me, and Creed groans. Ev gets up and grabs his laptop, bringing it over and sitting at my feet. Creed and Greg gather close, each of us waiting to see what Ev finds. I can feel myself shaking, so I’m thankful when Hawk’s arms tighten around me and he begins to rock me.

Suddenly, Ev curses and looks up at me.

“Just tell me,” I whisper, even though I can tell he would rather gouge his own eyes out.

“Harry Main. He was renting an apartment two blocks from your parents’ house. He bagged groceries at—”

“I remember him now. He always smiled at me, but it was a little off. It made my skin crawl. He was there the day me and my mom had a fight in the parking lot. I wanted to go to a party. She wanted to have a family dinner, but I couldn’t sit at the same table as my father and pretend everything was alright. I planned to go anyway, but I was too upset, so I crashed at my friend’s house.”

“That the night your mom was attacked?” Greg asks quietly.

I nod, tears sliding down my face, and I wipe them away. “You’re right. They did know who I was. And I think Harry or Fred, or whoever he really is, was my Penn Travis. I’m not sure why he didn’t use the Penn alias like the others.”

“He obviously wasn’t good at following the rules. His job was to protect you, but...” Creed’s voice trails off as I look at him.

“He probably thought he was helping when he hurt my mom. But everything got worse.”

“So he came back to finish the job,” Ev says.

“And when he realized he fucked up, he ran, and you were moved into witness protection, which just worked in the Division’s favor because now they had unlimited access to you. They could mold and manipulate you until they had you where they wanted you. But where does Cooper come into all this?” Greg asks.

“I think...” I start, pausing to swallow. “I think he was Harry’s replacement. Cooper was my new Penn Travis.”

That revelation leaves everyone in stunned silence.

“He was the one who suggested getting married to stay in the country before I met Avery. Having her move here with us made it so much easier for him.” Creed rubs his hands over his face.

“And for a while, he did look out for me. He was like the dad I always wanted. I really thought he was a good guy until he turned me in.”

“But why then? What triggered him to do what he did?” Creed frowns.

I think it over and sigh. “I told him what I could do.”

“But he already knew.”

“But I didn’t know that. He probably thought if I was willing to expose myself to him, I’d be willing to do it with you, too, and he couldn’t have that.”

* * *

A cold glass touching my arm makes me jump. I open my eyes and watch as Ev sits down beside me and hands me the glass of iced tea.

“Thanks.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Tired, angry, sad, confused. The list is endless.”

“And all understandable.”

I lean my head against his shoulder and take in the view as the evening sun dips below the mountains. “I’m scared to really let myself feel it all, though, because I can’t afford to fall apart. Not right now.”

“You do whatever the fuck you need to do, Avery. I’ll still be right here, sitting beside you.”

I take a sip of the tea and place it on the step beside me. “Creed wants me to date them again. A chance to get to know each other and build trust.”

He doesn’t look at me, but I feel him tense, bracing himself for the answer to the question that slips from his lips. “Are you going to?”

“After everything I just learned? Yeah, I am. My life has been one manipulation after another. I feel like a character on *The Avery Show*, but I refuse to let them win. Hawk and Creed fucked up, but it doesn’t change that what I felt for them was real. And after talking to them, I believe it was real

for them too. And I really need something to be real right now, Ev, because my whole damn life is a lie.”

“I get it. It’s okay.” He wraps his arm around me, tugs me closer, and holds me tight.

“You know what else is real?” I murmur.

“What?”

“This. Us.” I pull back and look up at him. The expression on his face is a mix of hope and wariness. “Creed thinks I should date you too.”

“What? Why?”

“Because he can see it.”

“See what?”

I lean forward and brush my lips against his, pulling back before we get carried away. “That there is something between us. Something I don’t want to ignore anymore. I came back for a few reasons, but mostly, I came back for Hawk and Creed. I stayed for you.”

“So I could help you?”

“You could help me from anywhere. We both know that.”

He looks down at me and smiles, a dimple popping out on his cheek. “You want to date me, Avery?”

“Yeah, I really do.”

He leans forward and drags his nose across mine. “Does this mean I can fuck you?”

I can’t help the shiver that rocks through me. “I think there should be a third date rule.”

“Hmm... What about second base?”

“I’m open to the possibility.” I grin, surprised I have that in me after everything I just found out.

“I’ll take whatever you’re willing to give, Avery.”

We both freeze when we hear Creed’s voice. “Hey, Hawk, I think Ev’s trying to steal our girl.”

“She’s not just our girl anymore,” Hawk replies instantly.

“I know, but why is he out there getting kisses and we’re stuck in here with Oz’s ugly mug?”

We laugh at Oz’s “Hey!”

“Good question. Think we should kidnap her again?” Hawk asks, making Ev burst out laughing and me turn in their direction to see them watching us from the open doors.

“Too soon, asshole.”

With that, they both head our way, and I tense. Hawk sits beside me while Creed moves down a step to sit in front of me. “What are you two talking about?” Creed asks, his tone friendly, but I can tell he’s worried about me by the way his eyes tighten.

“Third date sex and rounding second base,” I answer, surprising everyone, including myself.

“You know what, Ev? I think you might be good for our team,” Creed drawls.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Evander

Despite my urge to claim Avery, I managed to rein it in. We all have. It's been six weeks since we decided to group date, as Avery jokingly called it, and it has gone smoother than I anticipated.

After everything that had been thrown at her, she surprised us all by holding it together. There were moments I worried she'd break, but she'd rally and focus on her physical therapy or lose herself in a book. She somehow drew on this quiet inner strength that left me in awe.

True to the deal Creed and Hawk struck, we all started dating Avery. We all had our time alone with her, but we also spent a lot of time together. The parameters of my relationships had changed, not just with Avery but with them too. We'd relaxed around each other, letting our guard down as we realized we all had one common goal—to make Avery happy.

It was hard—every goddamned pun intended—because I wanted to fuck her so bad, I could barely think of anything else. But I needed to prove to her that what I wanted went beyond sex. Same for the others. At times, I worried they had a history with each other that I couldn't compete with. Then I reminded myself that for every good moment they built together, there was a bad memory ready to unravel it. In a way, they had it twice as hard as me. Avery and I could afford to let our feelings grow organically, falling a little deeper for each other every day. Hawk and Creed had to focus on repairing the damage they had caused. Theirs was a balancing act I didn't envy.

Now I am standing here waiting for Avery to arrive for our third date, and a part of me feels like a fucking kid going to prom.

“Why do you look like you need to shit?” Hawk asks from the sofa, digging into a bag of chips. I ignore him, focusing on the door that leads to the bedroom, wondering if Avery is having second thoughts.

“Maybe he ate something bad,” Creed offers. He curses as Hawk throws a thunderbolt at him, stunning Creed and taking first place in the race in his Mario Kart battle.

“I can hear you, you know.”

“We know. Now listen before Avery comes out. There are a few things we need to tell you so you don't mess up.” Hawk pauses the game and sighs.

I turn to look at them again. “This ought to be good. Alright, out with it.”

“Well, her favorite kind of food is fish. Take her to any seafood restaurant and you’ll have a happy clam on your hands,” Creed starts.

“That’s a good one.” Hawk nods. “Mangos are her favorite fruit, and mango sorbet her favorite dessert,” he adds.

“She’s terrified of heights, so I wouldn’t do anything involving roller coasters. Oh, and she tires easily, so you should have her back before ten,” Creed finishes.

“Really?” I smirk.

“Yup. You can thank us later.”

I cross my arms over my chest and glare at them. “Avery hates seafood. The smell makes her gag. She’s allergic to mangos. They make her break out in hives. And she loves roller coasters because she has a low-key obsession with theme parks.”

“How the hell do you know all that?” Hawk asks, shocked.

“He asked.” A soft voice has us all turning to see Avery walk into the room. Fuck me, she looks like a walking wet dream. She’s wearing a black fitted skirt that hits just above her knee. It has thigh-high splits on either side that give glimpses of her toned legs when she walks, and she’s teamed it with knee-high boots that will be starring in all my fantasies later. I have to fight a hard-on as my eyes move farther up her body. I take in the tight cream V-neck sweater and the fact that her hair is pulled back, exposing her neck—that’s begging to be kissed.

“Yeah, you’re not going out like that.” Creed stands up and crosses his arms.

“What are you talking about? There is nothing wrong with what I’m wearing,” she huffs, walking up to me. As soon as she’s in reach, I yank her to me and press a soft kiss on her lips, ignoring the protests from dumb and dumber.

“You ready?”

She grins. “Hell, yeah.”

I take her hand and lead her to the door as Creed yells at Hawk, “Tell her she can’t go out in that.”

“You’re being an idiot, Creed. I’m not showing any skin.”

“You don’t need to. That outfit leaves nothing to the imagination.” Hawk shakes his head. “Your skirt is so tight, I can see the outline of your panties.”

I open the door and turn when Avery stops to look at Hawk. “Now I

know you're lying because I'm not wearing any panties." She smirks before shoving me out the door and hurries out behind me.

She laughs as I scoop her up and run to the garage, knowing those fuckers will be right behind us. Unfortunately for them, I prepared for this. I pull the key out of my pocket and pop the locks on the truck before placing Avery gently in the passenger seat. Once she's in, I slam the door and jump in the driver's seat as they round the corner. I start the ignition and tear out of the garage before they get the stupid idea to follow us. Not that they can. When I took the keys from the lockbox earlier, I changed the code so that they couldn't get in to get keys of their own.

"Well, that was an exciting way to start our date." Avery laughs beside me.

"I knew they'd try something. They just can't help themselves."

"You don't think they've changed their minds about us, do you?" She looks at me, biting her lip.

"No, they're just being assholes because they can, and I'm the new guy."

"Well, that's true. And it's our third date. They might be a little jealous."

"Oh, no doubt about that, but they know I'm not going to hold you to that. You'll be ready when you're ready. I'm not going to pressure you, even if I die of blue balls."

"Well, we wouldn't want that now, would we?" she teases, sliding over and cupping my dick.

I swerve the truck and almost drive into a bush. "Jesus. Warn a guy next time," I choke out.

"I'm sorry. It's just, well, I've been so good. And honestly, it's fucking killing me, E. I can't believe you listened to me about the third date rule."

"Are you telling me if I would've rounded third base instead of second, you would've let me go for the home run?"

"I don't know why we keep using football analogies when I don't know anything about sports."

"Baseball."

"Whatever. Now, are you going to keep playing hard to get, or are you going to let me act out a scene from one of my favorite books?"

"You're trying to kill me, aren't you?"

"Nah, I just know a shortcut to heaven."

She pops open the button of my jeans and eases the zipper down. Without thought, I lift my ass so that she can tug my pants and boxers down far

enough for my aching cock to spring free. Gripping the steering wheel, I try to stay focused on the road. But her small hand wraps around the base of my cock, and the only thing I can focus on is remembering how to breathe. I feel her breath on me, and then she's dragging her tongue up the length of my cock to the tip, making me shiver.

"Fuck, I love third base."

Taking one hand from the wheel, I slide it into her hair and tighten it into a fist. "Open your mouth, Avery." I glance down just in time to see her wrap her lips around the tip of my cock. It's a miracle that I don't come from that visual alone.

The heat of her mouth as she slips more of my dick inside her makes my eyes roll back. And I have to fight the urge to hold her head in place while I take control and fuck her mouth until she gags. There is something about this woman that calls to the primal side of me. I've never considered myself dominant before, but Avery makes me want to throw her on the ground and fuck her like a wild animal during mating season. I don't know if that makes me a deviant, but I don't give a fuck right now, especially when she starts humming. The vibrations lick up my cock like an extra tongue, making me swerve.

"Avery," I growl as she looks up at me, all sweet and innocent. "More," I order. With a blink, she swallows me down and sucks. I curse loudly as she starts bobbing her head up and down my cock, her flattened tongue dragging across the underside, making my hips jerk.

She gags a little and pulls back, sucking as she goes. "Faster, baby," I beg, wanting to come but also not. I want to drag it out until I'm on the verge of delirium. But then I'd probably crash the truck, and I'd never do anything that would endanger her.

She picks up her pace and uses her hands to stroke the part of me she can't take. Her grip is firm and sure. As she strokes me, her movements become more rapid, and so does my breathing.

"Jesus, Avery, I'm gonna come," I warn her. But instead of pulling away, she nips me with her teeth and sucks harder. Unable to stop myself, I thrust as my cock pulses, filling her mouth with my cum.

She swallows me down and licks the sensitive tip before sitting back up and licking her lips. "You never know. You might make a baseball fan out of me yet." She grins.

* * *

I'm tucked away, and my breathing has almost returned to normal as I pull up and park in a large field.

"Oh my God." Avery gasps when she sees what we've come here for. "A hot air balloon! You're taking me up in a hot air balloon?"

"If that's—Fuck! I forgot, you hate flying. I'm sorry, Avery. We can—"

"No. I hate planes. I've always wanted to go up in a hot air balloon."

I look at her, confused.

"I'm not afraid of flying. I don't like being trapped in small spaces with no control. It's like being claustrophobic, but it only affects me on planes. I know it doesn't make sense. Most phobias don't."

"So, you're okay with this?"

"Yes!" A huge smile spreads across her face, and she claps her hands in delight, making me laugh as she scrambles out of the truck like I might change my mind.

I jump out and hurry around to her. "Woman, you're supposed to wait for me," I scold her.

"I'm sorry, I'm just so excited. Wait, am I dressed okay?"

"You'll be fine. You can always wear my jacket if you get cold."

"Okay."

I take her hand and lead her over to the balloon, laughing as she chats away nonstop about how she wanted to be a hot air balloon pilot when she was a kid.

"Hey, guys." I look over at Mark, our pilot for the day, and offer him my hand.

"Hey, good to see you again. This is my girl, Avery."

"Nice to meet you, Avery. Are you excited?"

"You have no idea. I'm so excited I could puke."

"Wouldn't be the first time. But if you could aim out the basket, I'd appreciate it." He laughs, making Avery blush. "Are you both ready?"

I look at Avery, who nods.

"Good, then let's get this show on the road while the wind and weather are in a good mood."

I grab Avery's hips and lift her into the basket before climbing in beside her. We stand quietly, listening to Mark talk us through what he's doing.

As soon as the balloon is off the ground, Avery wraps her arms around

me and presses her head against my chest. “Thank you, E. This is amazing.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet.”

I’ll admit, once the balloon is around three thousand feet in the air, I start to miss having solid ground beneath my feet. But I’d never let Avery know, not with the look of wonder on her face as she takes everything in.

As Avery holds on to the edge of the basket, I look over at Mark, who smirks at me as he pulls the headphones from around his neck and holds them up. “Noise-canceling.” He chuckles before he slips them on and moves to the other side of the basket. He faces away from us.

Stepping up behind Avery, I bend down and press a kiss to her neck, making her shiver before I slide my hands through the slits of her skirt and stroke my thumbs over the smooth skin of her thighs. When she leans back into me, I slowly inch the skirt up her legs.

Her hands cover mine to stop me, but I nip her ear with my teeth instead. “Hands on the basket, Avery.”

“E, we can’t.”

“Hands on the basket,” I repeat, my voice leaving no room for arguments.

With a shaky breath, she does as I ask, her hands gripping the basket, this time a little harder than before.

“Good girl,” I murmur as I slide her skirt up over her ass.

She whispers my name, but she doesn’t fight me. I slide my hands to her hips and realize she was telling the truth about not wearing panties.

Slipping one hand between her legs, I stroke her clit, and she widens her stance. “No panties, huh? Seems like you were hoping to get fucked tonight.”

I slip a finger inside her, and she tips her head back with a soft moan. “You going to let me, Avery? You know, once I fuck you, there’s no going back, right?”

“I don’t want to go back,” she tells me softly before I slip another finger inside her.

“Good, because once I give in to the craving, I won’t stop until it consumes me. One taste will never be enough.”

I grab a condom from my back pocket and hold it in my teeth. Popping open my jeans, I pull out my cock and give it a stroke before ripping open the wrapper and stepping back just far enough to slide the condom on.

“Bend over, baby, but keep your legs straight.”

“E, Mark will see us,” she whispers.

“I don’t care who sees us. Now bend over.”

She hesitates for a second before positioning herself the way I asked her to. I don't give her a chance to second-guess herself. I guide my cock to the entrance of her pussy and thrust inside her.

She makes a startled noise, but she's so wet that I glide in with ease. "Oh God," she chokes out as I grip her hips tightly and start fucking her hard.

"You feel so fucking good," I groan. "I knew you would."

She pushes back into me, meeting me thrust for thrust.

"Use one hand to play with your clit. I want to feel you come all over my balls."

She pulls one of her hands away from the basket and slips it between her legs. I feel her fingertips graze my cock before she starts circling her clit.

"Imagine if everyone down there knew what we were doing. They'd all be looking up here, hoping for a glimpse of this sweet pussy. How many of them do you think would want to swap places with me? How many of them wish it was their dick in your cunt right now?"

"Oh, fuck!" she curses as I feel her tighten around me.

"That's it, baby. Come for me. Let me feel what my cock does to you." I reach around and cover her mouth as I thrust into her, her screams muffled by my hand as she comes hard, milking my cock dry.

I lean over her, trying to catch my breath. She straightens and spins around, her eyes wide. I look over my shoulder and see Mark still facing the other way, but there is no way he doesn't know what we've been doing.

"I'm going to kill you," she hisses as she shoves her skirt back down.

I grin, pulling the condom free and wrapping it in a paper napkin I pull from my jacket pocket. I tuck it back into my pocket and wrap my arms around her.

"You can kill me if you want. I'm not sure anything can top that, so now would be as good a time as any."

She blows out a breath but laughs. "It's always the quiet ones," she grumbles, wrapping her arms around my neck. "Thank you."

"For amazing sex? Trust me, it was my pleasure."

"For being you. You're everything I never knew I needed." I rest my forehead against hers as her hair blows gently across my face. "Do you think Mark knows what we did?"

"No, I'm wearing headphones. I didn't hear a thing." A voice speaks up from behind me, making Avery's eyes go wide. I burst into laughter.

"I really am going to kill you." She dips her head as she blushes.

“Worth it.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Avery

With a deep kiss, Evander drops me off at Creed and Hawk's.

"I don't want the date to end," I complain as he pulls back and grins.

"Your date isn't over yet. I'm just tapping Creed and Hawk in. They miss you."

"I'm right here."

"But they can still feel the distance between you. I know you're scared, but if you're truly willing to give them a chance, you have to let your guard down a little. You can be sitting right next to them and still be a million miles away."

"I don't mean to. I'm—"

"Trying to protect yourself. But after being inside you, I know exactly what those guys are missing. And don't tell me you don't miss them too. I know you do. You light up like a firework every time I touch you. I can only imagine how combustible the three of you are together."

I lift up onto my toes and press another kiss on his lips. "I'm so grateful you came into my life."

"Not half as much as I am, Avery. Now go before I forget I'm a good guy and toss you over my shoulder."

"I mean, I'm not against the idea, as long as there are no rustic cabins involved."

He laughs but pulls away. "You're killing me. Go spend time with your husbands. I'm a phone call away if you need me."

"Will I see you later?"

"That all depends on how the rest of your date goes. But don't worry, I won't be able to stay away for long." He winks and backs away, that stupid, sexy dimple of his making certain parts of my body flutter. I watch as he turns and heads back over to the main house, just as I hear the door open behind me.

"Think we should hose her down? She looks like she's in heat," I hear Creed joke.

"I thought it was shock. I was going to offer her mouth-to-mouth because

I'm selfless like that."

"Yeah, you're a real fucking gentleman, Hawk." I laugh as I turn to face them.

Their eyes move over my body, making me squirm. I know I have their blessing to be with E, but I still can't help feeling a little guilty.

Creed sighs. "Still one of my favorite sights to see."

"What is?"

"A freshly fucked Avery."

I jolt at his words. Hawk walks over to me and scoops me up, like he's worried I'll run away. "It's all good, Avery. We're not mad. Jealous as fuck, but not mad."

"Really?"

"You tell me. Let your guard down and tell me if I'm lying."

I nod my head and open myself up to them. "Tell me again."

"I'm not mad that you fucked E. I'm just jealous as fuck."

"Truth."

"I love you. I want this to work out between us all. Not just you, me, and Creed, but E too."

"Truth," I whisper.

He dips his head closer, his lips grazing mine. "I really, really want to fuck you now, but I'd wait forever if you asked me to."

"Truth." I look over at Creed as Hawk carries me inside. "What about you? Do you feel the same?"

"About fucking you? Oh, yeah."

I scowl at him, but I can feel myself flush with need. "About E."

"Does he make you happy?"

"Yeah, Creed, he does."

"He treats you well?"

"Always."

"Make you cry?" I shake my head. "He hurt you?" He steps closer, remorse all over his face as he points out that all his faults are E's virtues.

"Never."

"Then I say he's perfect for you, sweetheart. All I ever wanted was for you to be happy."

"Truth," I whisper, feeling a tear slide down my cheek.

Hawk sits down on the sofa with me in his lap as Creed sits beside us.

"I'm sorry it took us so long to pull our heads out of our asses," he tells

me, wiping the tear from my face.

“I’m not. I used to think what we had was perfect, but there were so many secrets between us. We were always destined to fail. You guys lied to me, but I lied to you too.” I blow out a breath. “If you didn’t break me and force me to rebuild myself brick by brick, I wouldn’t have been strong enough to face everything that came after. I would still feel like that lost girl and not your equal. But mostly, if you didn’t screw up, I wouldn’t have Evander. And as fucked up as it sounds, he’s the greatest gift you guys have ever given me.”

“You’re right, that is fucked up,” Hawk says, making me elbow him. He laughs, “I’m joking. I know what we did damaged us. We react first and think about the consequences later. The three of us together are a fire that burns bright but, more often than not, out of control. Evander is pure ice, the opposite of us, and exactly what we need. More than that, he’ll never let our shit fall on you. We might be your warriors, willing to do battle for you, but he’s your shield from not just the world but us too.”

Creed and I both stare at him.

“What is with you?”

“What?”

“You’ve been like fucking Buddha lately,” Creed says, making me giggle.

“Asshole,” Hawk mutters under his breath before changing the subject. “Okay, on to more important things. Tell me how your date went. The sneaky bastard wouldn’t give us any details. We want to see if he upstages our romantic picnic.”

“Picnic?”

Creed punches Hawk in the arm. “Way to ruin the surprise.”

Hawk frowns. “Shit. Ignore that part.”

I smile and shake my head. “I don’t want to forget. A picnic sounds amazing. I’m starving.”

“Ha, score one for the OGs. We can teach E a thing or two about dating,” Hawk gloats.

“So, where did he take you?” Creed asks as he stands up, tugging me to my feet.

“Oh, on a hot air balloon ride.” Both of them fall silent.

“That over-achieving bastard,” Hawk complains, making me bust out laughing again.

“That’s it, clothes off,” Creed orders.

“Wait, what?”

Hawk stands up so that I’m sandwiched between the two of them. “It’s in the rules. You can’t have a naked picnic without being naked,” Hawk says, like I’m being silly.

“There are rules for a naked picnic?”

“Oh, yeah. Important ones.” Creed nods before whipping his T-shirt off over his head in that way that only guys can do. I stand and watch as his hands drop to his pants before looking behind me at Hawk, who is also stripping.

“You’re not naked, Avery. Do you need help?” Creed asks.

“Um...”

When Creed reaches for the hem of my sweater, his fingers grazing the skin underneath, I figure no other words are necessary.

“Arms up,” he orders, and I do as he says. He pulls my sweater up over my head, tossing it on the sofa before reaching around my back. He unhooks my bra and drags the straps down my arms.

“Now that’s better.” His voice husky, and I shiver at the sound. My nipples pebble, and my body is on fire.

Hawk’s hands move to the zipper on my skirt, and he slowly lowers it until the fabric gapes open. He pushes it down my legs and lets gravity do the rest.

“Holy shit, you weren’t lying about not wearing panties.”

“We don’t lie to each other anymore, remember?”

“That’s true. But going commando is going to earn you a spanking. It’s in the naked picnic handbook,” Creed says.

“That makes no sense.”

“And yet, it’s true,” Hawk agrees as they lead me toward the bedroom.

Creed pushes the door open, and I cover my mouth with my hands when I see the picnic setup on the floor. A pretty red-checked blanket is laid out with plates of chocolate-covered strawberries and brownies, little crustless sandwiches, and cubes of cheese. A bottle of sparkling water chilling in a bucket of ice sits to the side with three glasses, leaving just enough space for us to sit.

“I love it. Thank you.”

“No, thank you for giving us another chance,” Creed tells me, all the lightness gone from his voice.

I’m hungry, but now it’s not for food. I step into Creed, tipping my head

back in invitation. When he presses his lips against mine, I wrap my hand around his hard cock. He growls into my mouth, making my pussy flood with need.

“I thought you were hungry,” Hawk says, his hard cock pressed against my ass.

“Oh, I’m hungry, just not for food.”

“Thank fuck.” Hawk grabs my hips, lifts me up, and tosses me onto the bed. He climbs up and lies beside me. “Come ride my face. I’ve forgotten how you taste.”

I do as he asks and straddle his head, hovering just above him. He grips my hips and yanks me down hard, spearing my pussy with his tongue. And I scream.

While Hawk eats me like a man on a mission, Creed grabs a bottle of lube from the bedside table and opens the bottle with a snick. He liberally coats his fingers before moving up behind me. He trails the tip of one finger around my rosebud, teasing the entrance before dipping inside.

I moan.

Hawk sucks on my clit as I reach up and cup my breasts, feeling wanton and needy. With Creed’s finger sliding into my ass with ease, he adds a second, scissoring them slightly, making me gasp.

“You take anyone else in here, Avery?”

I shake my head. “Only you.” And it’s true. Even Hawk hasn’t fucked my ass because his girth has always made me hesitant.

“Good girl. I like that this is mine.”

Hawk mumbles something, but I don’t catch what he says. The vibrations of his words, though? Heaven.

By the time Creed has a third finger inside me, I’m writhing with need, grinding down on Hawk’s face so hard I’m worried I’m going to suffocate him. Slipping his fingers free, Creed lifts me off Hawk’s face and positions me over his cock instead. Hawk holds his cock steady as Creed slowly lowers me until I’ve taken him all.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Hawk curses as I lean down and kiss him, tasting myself on his lips.

Creed positions himself behind me. “Are you going to let me in, Avery? You gonna take us both?”

“Yes,” I gasp when he pushes the tip of his cock inside me.

Hawk holds still as Creed eases himself all the way in. There’s some pain,

but it only adds to the exquisite pleasure I'm feeling.

"That's it, Avery. Good fucking girl. You look so fucking sexy, taking both our cocks like that." Creed starts to move inside me, Hawk mirroring his actions, one pushing in, one pulling out. They find a rhythm that works for them before picking up the pace.

There is nothing I can do but feel. Nothing but hold on as they play my body like the experts they are. Eventually, it all becomes too much. I can't hold on any longer. I dig my nails into Hawk's shoulders and cry out, my pussy spasming around him, making him yell my name. I feel him flood my womb with cum a second before Creed thrusts inside me hard and comes too.

We all collapse, with me squished between them, but I like it. It's familiar, like coming home after being gone for a long time.

I've missed this. I've missed us.

"Let's get you cleaned up and eat." Creed eases out of me and lifts me off Hawk, our combined mess running down my leg.

"Shit, I'm sorry. I should have worn a condom. I lose my head around you," Hawk apologizes.

"Are you clean?" I ask him softly.

He winces but nods. "I've only ever gone bare with you, and I've been tested. I would never take risks like that."

I reach for his hand, so he knows I'm not mad, and keep hold of it as Creed carries me into the bathroom.

"Well, we might not have gotten to the food yet. But as far as dates go, it's been good, right?"

"Really good," I agree.

"Best sex ever." Hawk kisses my cheek, making me roll my eyes. So eloquent.

"It's always the best between us," Creed tells him as he turns on the shower.

"Remember that time we did it in the back of my truck at the drive-in? I had to gag Avery with my cock to keep her quiet," Hawk laughs, making me hot again.

"The back of the movie theater was one of my favorites. It's when we realized Avery liked the idea of getting caught."

"We've had sex in a lot of fun places, actually," Hawk states, looking at me. "Okay, tell us yours."

"My what?"

“Favorite place you’ve had sex.”

I look at them both and bite my lip. “A hot air balloon.”

They both look at me with mouths wide open before Hawk shakes his head and pouts. “Fucking overachiever.”

* * *

I reach for a glass and wince, feeling tender as I stretch.

“Are you okay?” Salem asks from beside me.

“Yeah. Sorry, am I in your way?”

“No, don’t worry. I slept like crap last night, so James offered to go to the bakery and bring back a bunch of pastries so that I don’t have to cook.”

“You should have said something. I would have made breakfast. I just don’t want to step on your toes.”

“This is your home too, Avery.”

“Uhh, I don’t know about that.”

Salem turns to look at me. “I thought you all were making headway.”

Well, head has been involved...

“You’ve been spending so much time with Creed and Hawk, and I’ve seen the way you are with Evander. Why would you want to leave?”

“It’s not that I want to leave, but staying isn’t that easy. I mean, with all the trouble I—”

“Seems to be what draws them to us,” she says with a grin.

I smile, too, before it drops.

“But it’s not just that. I can’t abandon the people relying on me to help them,” I tell her.

“You mean the kids the Division is searching for?”

“I mean anyone that’s being hunted or manipulated by the Division. I can’t just walk away and pretend it was all just a bad dream.”

“You’re just one person, Avery. There is only so much you can do.”

“It only takes one person to make a difference.”

“Yeah, well, it only takes one person to start a war, too, but that doesn’t mean they should.”

I pour myself a glass of juice and turn to look at Salem as she rubs her stomach. “I have to do something, Salem. Nothing will change otherwise. And that’s exactly what all the people before me did. Nothing. They either

became part of the problem or pretended there wasn't one."

"You don't know how deep this goes."

"My caring is not based on their level of corruption. They could have the power to burn the world to the ground, but it won't stop me from trying to save it."

"Why you?"

"Why not me?" I snap back, furious, but she just starts laughing. I jolt. What the actual—

"Yeah, you fit right in. Nobody else here likes to take the easy route either," she says with a smile before wincing and rubbing her stomach.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just running out of space. If this kid doesn't come soon, I might explode."

"Go sit down, Salem. You just told me that James was picking up food. You don't need to be in here."

"I was just getting the plates and—" She hisses, grabbing hold of the counter.

I slam the glass down and hurry over to her. "Salem?"

"I've had a sore back all night."

"Okay, random, but okay."

"I don't think it was a sore back."

"Fuck, Salem! You're in labor?" I screech at her as she grabs my hand and squeezes.

"I think that's a possibility, yes." She breathes through what's clearly a contraction, and when it passes, she stands up and let's go of my hand.

"Okay, I'm good. We should probably call Oz and Zig, even though I made James get rid of them. He told them that they needed to go through Cooper's attic."

"At eight in the morning?"

She bites her lip.

"Do I even want to know?"

"They were driving me crazy. They wouldn't stop fussing. I told them it was just a backache, but they kept acting like... like..."

"Like you might be having a baby?" I answer dryly.

"Yeah, that."

"Um, wouldn't that have made them stay home?" I ask, confused, as I pull out my phone and text Creed.

“You’d think that, right? But I might have fibbed a little and told them that the pain was gone and that I was fine.”

“What? You lied?”

“I’m not due for another two weeks,” she argues.

“Tell that to the fruit of your loins,” I snap, rubbing her back gently as Hawk and Creed run in, wearing nothing but their boxers. I take a minute to appreciate the beauty in front of me with a wistful sigh before Salem elbows me in the boob.

“Can you ogle them later?”

“Oh, I will,” I say without thought, and she growls at me. “Oh, right, sorry. Guys, Mrs. Liar-liar-pants-on-fire is in labor.”

Hawk and Creed look at Salem in tandem, but neither of them moves.

“What’s going on?” Ev asks as he walks in, shirtless and sweaty from his run.

“I feel like I’ve stumbled onto a porn set,” I mutter, fanning myself.

That earns me another elbow to the boob. Ouch. That’s going to leave a bruise. Wisely, I keep that to myself. “Salem is in labor.”

Ev rushes over and brushes the hair out of her eyes. “How far apart are her contractions?”

“I’m not sure. She’s been hiding them. This is the second one she’s had in five minutes, though.” Just then, she grabs my hand and squeezes. “Ow, ow, ow. My fingers.”

“You have three men now, what do you even need fingers for?” Salem snaps at me.

“Alright, let’s get you to the hospital. Where are Oz and Zig?” Ev asks calmly. He pulls out his cell as he walks over to the table.

“They went to Cooper’s. I can call them.” I offer.

“You’ll be lucky if you can reach them. The reception out there is terrible, and they never remember to take the satellite phone.” Ev sighs, tossing his cell on the table.

“I’ll drive over.”

“No. You stay here. I’ll send one of the others. I don’t want you out there alone. Go get Slade—”

“Slade and Jagger aren’t here. Astrid’s new lawyer called late last night. Said there was an issue with some paperwork. They needed her signature to proceed. They took the plane. They won’t be back for a few hours,” Salem says between breaths.

“And how do you know all this?” I question.

“Slade asked Zig for the plane. And I might have overheard while I was up pacing in pain.” She bites her lip nervously.

“And you still didn’t think it was labor?”

“James was up reading. Everyone was asleep. I didn’t want to make a fuss if it turned out to be nothing.”

“Oh shit!” she curses, and I realize why.

I look down at my wet feet and wonder if I should have stayed in bed this morning. “You’re leaking.”

“I hate you right now,” Salem snaps.

“Yeah, well, that sucks because we’re about to get up close and personal. Ev, can you run and grab Salem some clean underwear and a dress—something easy to slip on? While you’re there, grab her hospital bag—it’s packed and by the door—and throw it in the car. Oh, and if you can grab a towel, that would be great. Hawk and Creed, you need to get dressed. Wake up Greg on your way and tell him Salem is in labor. The three of you are going to have to take Salem to the hospital. She needs to be protected. Greg can stay here with me, and I’ll even go into one of the panic rooms if it makes you all feel better, but right now, Salem needs to be your priority.”

“I still need to get a hold of Zig and Oz,” Ev tells me as Hawk and Creed sprint out of the room.

“I’ll call James. He went to get breakfast. I’ll get him to head up there. Does he know where it is?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll text him and send him the GPS coordinates.” He plants a kiss on my lips. “We need a fourth date so that I can tell you I love you.” He winks before snagging his cell and jogging away, leaving me speechless.

Salem elbows my boob again, making me glare at the woman. “Bitch, that hurt.”

“Bite me.”

“You’re mean when you’re about to expel a human from your body.”

“Suck it up, buttercup,” she growls like she’s possessed, making me grin.

I step closer, ignoring the puddle I’m standing in and my wet socks, and wrap my arms around her. “You’re having a baby,” I whisper, feeling strangely choked up. I pull back and look into her wet eyes.

She sniffs. “I’m scared.”

“There’s nothing to be scared of. You’ll be in good hands at the hospital,

and if you think any of those men will let anything happen to you or that baby, you're insane."

"But the vision."

"Has changed. My coming here has altered things. You're too far along now to fit what Bella saw in her vision."

She blows out a breath just as another contraction hits her. Ev comes running back into the room a few moments later. I grab the towel he holds out and order him to turn around. "Let's get you cleaned up so you can get out of here."

She nods and holds on to me as I bend down and slip her underwear off before patting her dry with a towel. I throw the towel over the puddle and help her tug off the nightgown she's wearing, replacing it with the soft, clean cotton dress E grabbed.

"Give me two seconds," I tell her, running to the nearest bathroom and grabbing two of the nighttime pads from under the sink.

I run back, belatedly remembering I'm tracking baby juice all over the floors. I yank my socks off and toss them before taking the clean underwear off the counter and ripping open the pads, sticking them both in firmly. "This might not work for long, but it's better than nothing."

I help her into her panties and slide them up just as Hawk and Creed come crashing back through the door. Creed has his T-shirt on inside out and Hawk has on odd socks, but I don't say anything.

"Okay, Ev."

"Alright, let's get this show on the road. I called James. He's making a detour. He'll have Oz and Zig meet us at the hospital," Ev says as he scoops Salem up into his arms. "Guys, let's go. Greg is—"

"Here. I'm here." He hurries into the room, a soft smile on his face for Salem. "I can't wait to meet the next generation of Apex," he murmurs, placing a kiss on her forehead.

He steps back and wraps his arm around me. "Go. I've got Avery. Just keep us updated. We'll call Jagger and Slade and let them know what's going on."

"Thanks, Greg."

Ev stares at Hawk and Creed, who are still just standing there looking shell-shocked.

"Oh, for God's sake." Greg walks over and smacks them both upside the head. "Wake up, boys."

That snaps them out of it.

“Shit, come on. What are we hanging around for? Let’s go,” Creed orders, making his way to the garage.

Hawk walks over and gives me a quick kiss before pressing one to Salem’s forehead. “Okay, mama, let’s get this show on the road.”

My ovaries melt at his words.

Greg keeps his arm around me as we watch them leave. “You okay?”

“It was a lot for this early in the morning, but yeah, I’m okay. You want a coffee?”

“Yeah, but then we’ll head down to the safe room.”

I look up at him and frown. I know I suggested it to the guys, but I didn’t think it was really necessary.

He holds up his hands. “I’m not saying I think anything is going to happen, but if we have eyes on us, right now is the most vulnerable you’ve been since you got here.”

“And if they wanted to grab me, now would be the best time to do it.”

“I’m not trying to freak you out.”

“No, I know. Being cautious is good. Here.” I hand him a mug of coffee, grab one of my own, and take his hand.

“Honestly, it won’t be as bad as you think. We can watch movies or play games until they come back.”

“Mario Kart?”

He looks at me and laughs as he leads me downstairs to a set of metal doors. He pushes them open, revealing the safe room behind another door that’s ajar.

“Wouldn’t it be safer to have these rooms locked up tight?” I ask as Greg lets go of my hand and passes me his coffee. He pulls his gun and places his finger over his lips.

I stand tense as he checks out the room before motioning for me to come inside. I wait for him to close and lock the door before blowing out a relieved breath.

“Locking a safe room makes it harder for you to get into it. With someone hot on your heels, you won’t have a spare second to type in the code and wait for the locks to disengage.”

“True. Good point.” I hand him back his mug and look around the room. There is a small kitchenette in the corner and a door to the side that’s open, and I can see a toilet inside. There are a few shelves that hold some books,

board games, and a first aid kit. To the left is a comfortable-looking sofa and a television mounted on the opposite wall, with a bookcase beside it holding row upon row of DVDs.

“Okay, wow. This is not what I was expecting,” I say, walking over to the bookcase.

“I can’t even remember the last time I watched a movie on DVD.” I laugh. Everything is streamed these days.

“No internet.”

I open my mouth to ask why but shut it again, realizing it doesn’t matter. I scan the choice of movies and smile. “I’m guessing the guys stocked the shelves.”

He looks at the DVDs and laughs. “Whatever gave you that idea?” Most of the movies are action movies, with a few thrillers thrown in.

“Not that the girls aren’t into action movies, but could you imagine if we gave them free rein? We could end up locked down here for hours with only chick flicks.” He looks horrified at the thought, and I burst out laughing.

I take a seat on the sofa and tuck my feet up under me, which are cold now without socks, underneath me. “I’m sorry you’re missing out.”

“On the birth? Don’t be. I would have only been sitting in the waiting room worrying anyway. The plan was that Astrid, Zig, and Oz were supposed to be in the delivery room with Salem. And the rest of the guys would be stationed outside the room as an extra layer of security. I don’t know if you’re aware, but because of Salem’s abilities, she heals faster than the average person. Not enough that anyone should notice while she gives birth. But if she has to have an emergency C-section or something and is kept in for a few days, things will get dicey.”

“Oh shit, I didn’t think about that.”

“We have it covered as well as we can. We’ve arranged to have her transferred to another hospital, where Evander can hack her file if needed. We thought about a home birth. But the baby is measuring big, which isn’t a surprise given the size of Oz and Zig. But if she needs help, the thirty minutes it would take us to get from here to the hospital could make all the difference.”

“No wonder she’s so scared. She has all that to worry about on top of giving birth, which is terrifying in itself. I’m surprised Zig and Oz didn’t buy a helicopter, just in case.” I laugh at the thought, and Greg just looks at me like no one ever suggested it.

He groans, sitting down beside me. “Never tell Zig and Oz that.” I nod and mime zipping my lips, but I can’t help the chuckle that escapes at the look on his face.

“Do we need to call their sister?”

“Nah, we’ll wait until we have something to tell them. Luna would jump on the first flight out, but I know Zig and Oz would rather wait until they have Salem home safely before she has visitors.”

He takes a sip of his coffee. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Was he remorseful? Cooper, I mean.”

I know he’s asking what Cooper was like when he took me back. I bite my lip and think about how best to answer him. Greg and Cooper were close, so this is a big blow to the man. I consider lying to him. It would make the grieving process easier, but he should hear the truth.

“No. He tried to make it seem like he was, but it didn’t feel genuine. At the time, I was so confused—waking up in a hospital and being told I was crazy—that I thought I might have been imagining it. But obviously, now I know differently. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. He screwed you over, not the other way around. I just don’t understand how he hid it so well. I keep looking back, racking my brain, trying to pinpoint when he turned, but I can’t find it. There’s not one single moment that I can say that’s it. That’s the moment things began to fall apart.”

I place my mug on the small table beside the sofa and turn back to him, taking his hand in mine. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but—”

“I’m looking for the good in a man who didn’t have any,” he huffs and shakes his head.

I consider my words carefully. “I think he showed you all who he needed to be for you to accept him. If he had slipped even once, you would have known, but he was good. Really good.”

“Like an undercover agent becoming his alter ego.”

“Yes, exactly. I don’t think the man you knew as Cooper ever really existed, but that doesn’t mean that he was all bad, either. He did good, too. In his twisted way, he brought me here, gave me a family, and for a while, he kept me safe. I think Kay getting sick did break him. It made keeping his cover harder. He took risks and became reckless because he knew he was about to lose the one thing he loved. The one person that stopped him from crossing the line that he couldn’t come back from, but in the end, did

anyway.”

“Maybe. And that’s the kicker, because maybes and what-ifs are all I’m left with. Over twenty years with the man by my side. I considered him my brother, but to him, I was just a means to an end. And yet I’m still mourning the man.”

“How he felt is irrelevant. His deceit doesn’t erase your love for him. Trust me. I know that better than anyone.”

“How’d you get so wise?” He smiles, placing his cup on the floor near his feet.

“You have met Hawk and Creed, right? The options were get wise or go crazy.”

He laughs before pulling out his phone. “I better let Astrid, Slade, and Jagger know what’s going on.”

I sit quietly while he makes the call. When nobody answers, he sighs and sends a text instead. “They must still be in their meeting. I’m letting them know what’s going on and to head straight to the hospital once they land.”

“Salem said they would be back in a few hours, so I wouldn’t worry too much. From what I’ve heard, first babies take their time. I’m sure they’ll be back before the baby gets here.”

“You’re right, of course. I—” His words cut off when there is banging on the door. Greg stands when a brown paper bag appears in front of the window. When it disappears and James’s face takes its place, Greg chuckles. “Oh good, I’m starving.”

“We have food—“

I cut him off with a glare. “Not yummy baked goods. Why didn’t he just let himself in?”

“Door only works from the inside once it’s occupied.”

“Wow, you guys take your safe rooms seriously.”

“That we do. You never can be too sure what the enemy has planned.” He opens the door manually while I stand up.

While my thoughts are on the enemy, it never dawns on me that it might be our friends who would turn on us. It should have after talking about Cooper. It isn’t until the door opens, revealing James with an expression etched in regret, that some sixth sense has me stepping back. I open my mouth to warn Greg, but it’s too late. James has already pulled his gun. He shoots Greg in the stomach before pointing the gun at me. The bag of food in his hand now on the floor. I stare in shock as Greg drops to the ground and

his blood seeps through his shirt toward a croissant that escaped the bag. Something hard slams into my head, and I collapse on top of Greg.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Hawk

I check my watch and frown. “I thought Oz and Zig would be here by now,” I tell Creed as we wait for E to give us the all-clear to come back in.

“They probably got caught in rush hour. If they don’t get here soon, I’ll call them so they can talk to Salem. I can see how nervous she is.”

“Of course she’s fucking nervous. She’s going to be squeezing a watermelon out of a teeny tiny hole.”

“Yes, thank you for that,” Creed groans as the door opens.

“Okay, she’s good. You can come in now.” Ev pokes his head out before disappearing once more.

“It annoys me that the man is as cool as a cucumber when we’re... not.”

“Speak for yourself.” I shove him and head inside, where Salem is now in a hospital gown. She’s lying on the bed, looking at us hopefully.

“Any sign of them?”

“No, but I was just saying traffic is horrible right now,” Creed tells her.

“He’s right. Plus, I heard there was a big accident this morning, so they’ve closed a few roads down,” the nurse says as she writes something in Salem’s chart.

“Typical.” I sigh, moving to stand next to Salem and offer her my hand.

“You’re four centimeters dilated right now. Are you sure you don’t want an epidural? I’m asking now because later on it might be too late.”

“No, I’m okay, thanks.”

“Alright. Well, I’ll be back to check on you in an hour or so, but if you need anything, just use your call button beside you.”

Salem nods and takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly when another contraction hits. I let her squeeze the fuck out of my hand while I stand here feeling absolutely useless.

“You’re doing great, Salem,” Ev tells her, stroking her hair.

“I just want them to hurry up and get here already. All these damn plans, and everything feels like it’s falling apart.”

“I’ll go call them and tell them to hurry up, or I’ll kick their asses,” I offer as she turns to look at me.

“You’ll really beat them up for me?”

“In a heartbeat, Salem.”

“I love you,” she whispers, her lip wobbling, making me panic a little.

Creed laughs, nudging me aside. “Go. I’ll hold her hand.”

We swap places, and I step out into the corridor and call Zig. When it goes to voicemail, I call Oz. It rings and rings, but he doesn’t pick up. With a curse, I call James.

I sigh with relief when he answers. “James? Did you make it to Cooper’s yet?”

“Ah, yeah. I’m heading back to Apex now. They said they were going straight to the hospital. Is everything okay?”

I blow out a relieved breath. “No, it’s fine. We were just worried.”

“Well, traffic is a bitch. It took me forever to get there, and I can’t see them getting to you anytime soon, either.”

“Alright, man, no worries. Thanks for the update.”

“Sure. Bye, Hawk.”

I hang up with a frown before walking back into the room. “I got a hold of James. He said they’re on their way and confirmed that traffic is a bitch, so it might take a while.”

“So, I just need to cross my legs, right? No problem,” Salem chokes out.

Lord, I hope she can. If Oz and Zig miss this, I suspect we’ll be attending their funeral next week.

When an hour passes and they still haven’t arrived, and worse, we still can’t reach them, I pull E outside into the corridor with me.

“We knew they’d be a while,” he tells me.

“I know, but something feels off. Even with the traffic, they’d be close enough to get a hold of. Can you track where their truck is? Maybe they left their phones at Cooper’s.”

“Yeah, hold on.”

He takes out his cell and starts typing. I’ve never been so glad that we all agreed to have tracking devices on our cars. I watch him frown and step closer.

“This doesn’t make sense.”

“What is it?”

“It says the truck is still at Cooper’s. They haven’t left yet.”

“What the fuck? I knew something felt off. Something must have happened. No way they’d miss this.”

“Fuck!” he curses, looking back at the door just as my cell phone rings.

I answer it without looking to see who it is. “Zig?”

“No. And why isn’t anyone answering their fucking phones?” Slade snaps. “Did we miss it? Has she had the baby yet?”

“No, but Slade, we got a huge fucking problem. Oz and Zig went to Cooper’s this morning. They have no service there. James was out, so we called him to go let them know. When we spoke to him just over an hour ago, he said they were on their way. But E just low-jacked their truck, and they haven’t left the house.”

“Fuck. Alright, we’re flying back now. There is a field next to the house. I’ll see if I can change the flight plan and head that way. Let me call you back.”

Ev grabs my arm. “Tell him to text me the details, and I’ll get it sorted for him.”

“You hear that, Slade?”

“Yeah, I got it. I texted him the details. Man, it’s so handy having a hacker on our side,” he mumbles as he hangs up.

“Alright, I’m going to let you do your thing. What the fuck am I going to tell Salem?”

“Nothing. Not until we know what’s happening. She has enough going on without worrying about her men too.”

“Right, so go in there with my game face on and lie to the woman.”

“It’s not lying to pretend everything is fine when it might actually be fine.”

“God, I hope you’re right, E.”

I leave him to work his magic and head back into Salem’s room. “How’s she doing?” I ask Creed quietly as Salem sips water from a paper cup.

“Midwife just came in and checked her out. She said she is progressing well and is now seven centimeters dilated. I don’t know what that means, and I really didn’t want to ask,” he grumbles.

“You don’t want to.” I move up to Salem, take her water from her, and place it on the table.

“Anything?”

“Not yet. But Astrid, Slade, and Jagger are on their way. I spoke to them as they were preparing to take off.”

“Oh, good. Because at this rate, they’ll be here before Oz and Zig,” she snaps before apologizing. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Shhh, it’s all good, Salem. Why don’t you have the epidural? I hate seeing you in so much pain.”

“I can’t. I’ll recover from it too quickly. And if I have to have an emergency C-section, they’ll think they’re good to go, but I’d end up feeling them cutting me open.”

I stare at her, horrified. “Are you serious?”

She glares at me. “Does this look like my joking face?” A scream rips from her before she can say anything else as she grips my arm and digs her nails into the skin. I look at Creed, who is staring down at her in concern.

After that, her contractions start coming faster and more frequently, one right on top of the other. I don’t know how she’s doing it. I’m exhausted just watching her.

After another hour and another visit from the nurse, my cell starts ringing. “I’ve gotta take this.” I head out into the corridor before anyone can stop me and answer as I close the door behind me. “Tell me.”

“Hawk?”

“Zig? Thank fuck. We thought something had happened to you. You guys okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. We’re on our way.”

“Alright, but you’ve gotta hurry. I’m not sure how much longer she’s gonna be able to hang in there.”

“We’re coming, I promise. Tell Salem we love her.”

I blow out a relieved breath and nod. “How long?”

“We’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

“All right, I’ll tell her.” I hang up and make my way into the room. “They’re thirty minutes out.”

Salem bursts into tears. Creed wraps his arms around her as Ev looks at me and frowns. “What was the problem?”

“I don’t know, but I spoke to Zig myself, and he says they’re fine.”

“Maybe you should beat their asses, making us worry,” he grumbles. I can’t help but laugh, relieved that they’re okay and on their way.

We all focus our attention on Salem, keeping her calm and breathing with her. Twenty-five minutes later, the door slams open, and Oz and Zig rush in. As soon as Salem sees them, she starts crying.

We move out of the way as Zig and Oz hurry over and take our places. I grab the door and wait for Ev and Creed to walk out before turning back. Salem is wrapped up in the arms of her men, each looking at her like they are

holding their entire world. I can only hope to be half as lucky as they are one day.

With thoughts of little girls who look like Avery on my mind, I follow Ev and Creed into the waiting room. Astrid rushes over to me as soon as she sees me. “How is she?”

“She’s doing good. Better now that Oz and Zig are here.”

“I’m supposed to be in there with her, but I don’t know if she’ll still want me now that I’m late,” she babbles.

I hold her arms and look into her eyes. “Go. She’ll be happy to see you, I promise. You know which room she’s in?”

“Yeah.” She looks back at Jagger, who gives her an encouraging nod before she heads off toward Salem’s room. I watch her until she knocks on the door and disappears inside.

I walk over to the chair next to Slade’s and collapse into it with a grunt.

“Busy morning?” Slade drawls.

I flip him off. “I’m getting too old for this shit. Everything go okay with the lawyer?”

“Yeah, it was actually a fuck-up on their end. Astrid is selling her house in Malibu. We got a phone call last night saying a section of the papers she’d signed were missing, so we needed to fly out as soon as possible to re-sign because the buyers wanted to move in ASAP. We get there, only to find the papers were there all along, and the secretary that called us mixed Astrid up with someone else,” he grunts.

“So, it all went through okay?”

“Yeah.” He smiles. “No turning back now. We’ll have to go to pack up the things she wants to keep this weekend, but I don’t think there’s much she wants.”

“Too many memories?”

“Not enough. As much as that place was a sanctuary for her, it was also her prison. She spent a lot of lonely years there, hiding from the world.

“I guess I understand that. So, did Oz and Zig tell you why they were still there? Did they find something?”

“They didn’t say much of anything once we told them that Salem was in labor. All they cared about was getting here.”

“They cut it fucking close, that’s for damn sure,” Ev grumbles, making Creed laugh.

“I’m sure Salem will make them pay for it later.”

“If she doesn’t, I will. It broke my heart watching her worry they wouldn’t make it in time.” Ev sighs, leaning back and stretching out his legs.

“Speaking of breaking hearts, what’s going on with the three of you and Avery? Is she staying?”

“Smooth, asshole.” Jagger shakes his head.

“I hope so,” I answer.

“You mean you haven’t asked her?” Jagger asks, shocked.

“She should know we want her here,” Creed says.

“She reads lies, not minds.”

“We’ll talk to her. She has a lot going on. We don’t want to scare her off,” Ev says softly.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. It’s obvious she likes you.” He looks at Ev. “All of you.”

“I hope so, because she wasn’t happy when these two kidnapped her. Imagine how pissed she’ll be if we’re forced to do it again.”

Creed elbows him while Slade and Jagger laugh. I scan the room, checking the corridor and the double doors, still feeling a little on edge.

“Anyone find this all a little anticlimactic?” Jagger asks after a few minutes.

“Not sure Salem will agree with that.”

“Not that, but the danger itself. Avery came back to warn us, and yet nothing’s happened.”

“So, the vision changed. That’s what we wanted, right? Maybe something one of us did helped. Maybe it was the kidnapping? Maybe we saved the day after all,” I joke, but Creed frowns. “What is it? I hate it when you make that face.”

“Ev, you ever find out anything else about the man and woman from the diner that day?”

“Paul ran a background check for me and didn’t find anything. Carly Keep had a history of mental illness. He didn’t say much about the boyfriend, Neil Fellows, though. I planned to do a little digging myself when things calm down a little.”

“What are you thinking?” I ask Creed. There must be a reason he brought it up.

“I’m thinking, what if Avery stepping in front of that bullet was the thing that changed the vision? She stopped everything from playing out the way her seer said, without even realizing.”

“As simple as that?” Slade frowns.

When I scowl at him, he shakes his head. “I didn’t mean it like that. Are you saying you think the shooter was the one who was supposed to hurt Salem?”

“I don’t know, maybe? Or maybe it was not getting shot that changed things. I’m here, not dead. Being killed would have meant the trip here would have left Salem with just Ev and Hawk. She would have been easier to grab.”

“Which would mean Creed was the intended target all along,” Jagger points out.

“Sounds good in theory, but there is no way anyone could have predicted when Salem would go into labor. Or, for that matter, that Oz and Zig would be caught up at Cooper’s place or that we’d be out of the state.” Slade laughs at us.

“That would be a good point if they didn’t have a kid who could see the future so anything is possible.” Jagger sighs.

I look over at Ev, who is quiet, and see him tapping away furiously on his cell phone. I sit and watch him, not liking the expression on his face at all.

“Carly didn’t just suffer from mental health issues. She’d spent a large portion of her life in a mental health facility. She was only discharged three days before the shooting at the diner,” he says, looking up at me.

Slade whistles. “I guess that explains a lot. Your cop friend didn’t mention that?”

“He said she had issues. It was my fault. I should have asked more questions.”

We all look at Ev now. “Why would you? She snapped, shot someone, and turned the gun on herself. You were not hunting for a suspect. The suspect was dead.”

“I think Carly Keep was just a small part of something bigger.”

“Why though?”

“Call it a hunch. I need my spare laptop from the car. I’ll be right back.” He is up and gone before anyone can stop him.

“Okay, is anyone else confused?” Jagger asks.

“I don’t know what Ev’s thinking, but I still feel like something is off.” Creed sighs.

“Same. I’ve had this bad feeling all day.” I look down the corridor, happy to see that it’s still empty. As much as I’d like to head home and wrap my arms around Avery until this feeling goes away, I can’t. I’m not leaving this

hospital until I know Salem and the baby are okay.

Nobody says anything else until Ev comes back with his laptop. He sits down and starts typing. We all watch a million emotions play across his face.

“Neil, was the one who had Carly committed.”

“Her boyfriend?” I wince—another reason she’d want to shoot him.

“That’s just it, I can’t find any evidence that they were ever together. I hacked the system and saw the footage from the day he carried her unconscious body into the facility, and I watched him walk her out three days before the shooting. Other than that, there were no visits or phone calls until an hour before she was released.”

“Where’s the boyfriend now?”

“He went home to his wife, according to the police. Paul said an officer interviewed the couple and that the wife was pissed and in the process of kicking her husband out.”

“That’s not surprising.” Creed shrugs.

“No, what is surprising is that I can’t find a marriage certificate.”

“So, they weren’t married?”

“No, and cops don’t ask for proof of marriage when they visit, especially when it’s just for some follow-up questions.”

“Neil was the intended victim, not the attacker. So they wouldn’t have pushed too hard when, as far as they were concerned, the case was closed.”

“So, who exactly is this guy?” Slade questions.

“That’s what I’d like to know.”

“What was Carly committed for?” Jagger leans forward and looks at Ev. Ev types quickly before looking up. “She could hear voices.”

“So, she was schizophrenic?”

Ev growls. “That’s what I would have thought if Neil hadn’t committed her and signed his name Penn Travis.”

Creed jumps from his seat as Jagger starts cursing. “So, she was there to take me out? But we still don’t know why.”

“I think she was manipulated. I think Carly was gifted in some way and couldn’t cope so they used her to their advantage because she was a liability and expendable. Maybe the target was you Creed and perhaps you were just the first they planned to take out. Avery fucked that up, but that doesn’t mean they’d just give up.” E states.

“Their psychic would have given Avery a heads up if she saw something else though.” I run my fingers through my hair.

“Relying on a child who may or may not have a vision is dumb. They’d be better off planting a—” Slade snaps his mouth shut, his eyes going wide.

“A spy? You think Avery is a...” I choke out, unwilling to believe it.

“Fuck.” Ev jumps up, his laptop toppling to the floor as he runs toward Salem’s room.

We all run after him, having no idea what’s going on. He shoves the door open, surprising Zig and Oz, who whirl around as Astrid dabs a towel against Salem’s head.

“What the fuck, guys?” Zig snaps as Ev grabs a hold of him.

“Why did it take you so long to leave the house?”

“We came as soon as we heard.” Zig shoves him off.

“What’s going on?” Oz frowns, stepping closer.

“Why didn’t you leave when James told you Salem was in labor?”

“What are you talking about? We haven’t seen James since this morning.”

Ev turns to look at me, and that’s when everything in me turns to ice.

“He was up when Salem went into labor. I bet if I check, he contacted Astrid’s law firm or made the call himself about needing to sign contracts. He talked Oz and Zig into going to Cooper’s, where they’d be out of signal, and he made it so that he was the one out of the house, guaranteeing we’d call him to go to Oz and Zig.”

“James is the spy. Why though? Salem’s here and safe.” Jagger looks between us.

“Because Salem isn’t the target anymore, Avery is.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Avery

The first thing I feel when I wake up is the blinding pain in my head. The second is the vomit rushing up the back of my throat. I roll over just in time to throw up. The pain in my head is so bad that I almost pass out again.

“Easy, Avery, try to breathe through it,” a soft voice says as I feel my hair being pulled away from my face.

I crack my eyes open and see a familiar face staring back at me. “Emma.”

“You know who I am? Most people call me Kara.”

“I know you were rescued by my husbands, who were then tricked by a man named Cooper. He was the one who brought you here.”

Her hands stop moving as I breathe through the pain and manage to focus on her frowning face. “Hawk and Creed are your husbands? Both of them?” she whispers.

“Yeah.”

“They were nice to me. Not like the other one. He was cold.”

“They didn’t know who he was or what you could do. They really thought they were just rescuing you. I was the one who helped them figure it out. Why am I here, Emma?”

“What do you remember?”

“Umm. We were in the safe room talking, waiting on news, when—” I gasp and sit up abruptly, causing the whole room to spin, and I find myself flat on my back again.

“Dammit, I told you to take it easy.” She smooths my hair back again as I fight the urge to throw up once more. She leans over me, checking my eyes as she talks in a hushed tone. “There are cameras. They can’t hear you, but they can see you.”

“I don’t understand,” I whisper, a tear sliding down the side of my face as an image of Greg on the floor flashes in my mind.

“You were brought here by a man named James. I’m sorry, I don’t know his last name. Do you remember him?”

“He shot Greg,” I cry, which only intensifies the headache.

“Shh, calm down and listen to me. This is important. James did not turn

on you on purpose. He was snatched when he flew out to surprise his grandchildren a few weeks ago.”

She bites her lip, her face pale, as she leans closer. “They put something in him—some type of chip. It’s way beyond my comprehension. But from what I’ve been able to piece together, it works in a couple of ways. The first is that he can be tracked. The second, when the chip is activated remotely, it leaves the individual vulnerable to... suggestions.”

“You’re talking about a control switch.”

She gives a small nod. “The original chip was invented back in World War I. They wanted obedient soldiers who followed their commands without question. But most didn’t survive the implantation, let alone the host of issues that came along with having a foreign body wedged into their brain.”

“Jesus,” I hiss.

“When gifted people were discovered and they were given handlers, the chips were adapted.”

“Why?”

“The original handlers became attached to their charges. They started questioning their orders, and that couldn’t happen. When the chip was reintroduced, it limited a lot of that because it could alter certain signals in the brain that dealt with emotions such as love and empathy. The problem with any technology, though, is that there are always going to be glitches.”

“Is that what happened with Frank?”

“Who?”

“He was my handler. My Penn Travis.”

“I don’t know, but if something was wrong with your handler, then yeah, it’s possible his chip was malfunctioning. Of course, it could also be that the man was unstable to begin with. What did he do?”

“He killed my parents.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. It was a long time ago. Just tell me what this has to do with James and my current situation.”

“I don’t know what James’s orders were other than to bring you back here. But you need to know this wasn’t his fault. He fought them, Avery. He fought them so damn hard,” Emma chokes out.

I feel more tears fall.

“In the moments when he was lucid, he talked to me. He made me promise to come up with a backup plan if the worst happened.” She blows

out a breath.

“Can you remove the chip?”

She shakes her head, swiping at her own tears now. “I’m not a doctor. I know everyone assumes that, but I’m not. All I see is the damage. I have no idea how to fix it. That’s why there is usually a team around me.”

“And now?” I ask because, looking around, we seem to be alone.

“They are prepping the OR.”

“For what?”

“For you, Avery.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We don’t have much time. They’re planning on impregnating you.”

“They’re going to rape me?” I shriek before she covers my mouth with her hands.

“They want to use the eggs they harvested from you when you were nineteen.”

“I didn’t have my eggs harvested. I—”

“Had your wisdom teeth removed. They told you you had a reaction to the anesthetic—”

“Because I ached all over the next day,” I sob, feeling violated.

“I know this is a lot, but you need to listen to me. They can’t do the procedure, Avery, because you’re already pregnant. And once they find out, they’ll make you abort it.”

“What? Why, if they want to get me pregnant, anyway?” I manage to get out as my brain tries to absorb the fact that I’m pregnant.

“Because the eggs they want to implant are fertilized by a donor they choose.”

“Oh God, Emma, you have to get me out of here.”

“I’m going to, but you have to pay attention and do as I say. I caused a problem this morning, which meant the children had to be moved to the safe house.” She slides her hand into mine, and I feel a piece of paper but don’t draw attention to it. Closing my fingers around it, I wait for her to continue.

“Lara is at the safe house with the kids. She knows what to do. She’ll keep them safe until you get there. I’ve left information with her for you. Do with it what you will. It’s all I could get without being caught.”

“What about you?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m planning on taking down these bastards for good. Now listen. Once James texted that you were secure, a chopper was

sent to pick you up. Knowing your man, *or men*, would need a way to find you, James took the tracking device from one of Apex's vehicles with him. Hopefully, they've figured out what's going on by now. And with the means to track you, they'll be on their way. Tell Hawk and Creed I said thank you. I don't hold any ill will toward them. As much as I hate it here, I wouldn't have survived what those bastards in Somalia had in store for me."

She looks at her watch before nodding. "It's time. In a minute, an orderly will come to wheel you down to the clinic. You're in the gown to not arouse suspicion, but I've left your jeans and found you a pair of running shoes to wear. In a second, I'm going to pretend to administer something to knock you out. So, I need you to lie still."

I do as she asks. She turns and grabs something before facing me once more. She leans over me, needle in hand, making me panic for a second before she starts whispering to me. "There is a gun under your pillow and a set of master keys that will open the interior doors if you need them. But once I activate lockdown, the exterior doors will lock and won't open without the override code, which I don't have. If you aren't out before the building locks down, you need to hide until someone overrides the system. Then get to the safe house as fast as you can. There won't be time for you to wait for a rescue because once they have this building back in their control, they'll go for the children."

I nod in understanding, her words triggering a memory—something I'd forgotten all about.

You might not need it today or tomorrow—maybe you'll never need it at all—but if you do, if you find yourself locked down, then the 8-digit key is home. Do you understand, Avery? Home, not the house—your heart.

"Now pretend to fall asleep," she murmurs, pulling me from my memories that, at the time, I thought were the ramblings of a guilty man.

"When you get to the safe house and find the kids, tell my daughter I love her."

"What?" I reach out to grab her but stop myself, knowing I can't give myself away now.

"Bella is my daughter. They did to me what they're about to do to you and then kept her from me, using her as leverage. And as long as they have her, I'll do anything they ask of me. Do you understand that? Anything. She'll never have a life as long as these bastards can dangle her in front of me like a carrot."

The door opens, stopping me from saying anything else, my heart threatening to beat right out of my chest, and I close my eyes.

“She’s ready.”

I keep my eyes closed as I feel someone approach the bed.

“Gross. I just stepped in puke.”

“She was hit on the head and drugged. Of course she was sick. She’ll be fine now that she’s out.”

“I don’t get paid enough for this shit,” the orderly mumbles as he pushes the bed.

“I’ll follow you down. I need to talk to one of the doctors.”

“I should warn you, they’re all in a pissy mood.”

“Aren’t they always?” Emma replies. As I listen to them talk, the only other sound is the squeak of one of the bed’s wheels.

“True,” the orderly chuckles. “But this time, I think it has something to do with one of the big bosses coming to visit.”

I hear Emma’s footsteps falter for a second before she recovers. “Do you know which one?”

“No. They just kept calling him Boss Man, but they’re all boss men to me.”

I try to keep my breathing even so that I don’t give myself away, even when I feel Emma give my leg a comforting squeeze. Though it’s true most of the main bosses are referred to as “boss,” in person we use their names. Only one man is called Boss Man at all times, and I think that’s to hide his true identity. That man is the only one that truly freaks me out because there is something off about him. Thankfully, I’ve only met him twice, but that was more than enough for me.

I hear more doors open a second before I feel Emma squeeze my leg once more. I realize a second later that it’s a warning when a robotic voice yells through the speaker system.

Warning. Initiating safeguarding protocols.

“Shit, I’ll take her. You better get out of here before they lock us down.”

“They’ll fire my ass,” the orderly says, panicked.

Emma insists, “I’ll tell them I ordered you to get the file they needed from my car. Go, or you’ll be quarantined for weeks.”

“Fuck it. Thanks, Kara. I owe you.”

“Just be safe,” she says quietly as the man runs away.

I open my eyes and look at her.

“Okay, this is it. I know you know all this, but with the drugs still in your system, I’m going to run over everything quickly, just in case. That announcement means stay in your room. It’s a soft lockdown until the next alarm blares. One shrill ring gives the all-clear. Three means to move to the panic rooms, but most people will be doing that already as a precaution. The clinic itself is one big panic room. It’s designed to protect the patients. All the lab research and samples are in the same place too. It’s the heart of the whole place and what the building was designed to protect. Five rings mean the locks will engage. Once the building is locked down, nobody can get in or out—except the Boss Man. And if he’s here, I don’t have much time left. I’m sorry, Avery. I didn’t mean to leave the rest up to you.”

I sit up and fight the urge to throw up again as Emma races down the corridor, pausing as she reaches the door to the lab. “Be safe, be happy, and take care of my daughter,” she yells before pushing her way inside.

Emma’s words make my blood run cold. I have no clue what she’s up to, but she doesn’t think she’ll be walking out of here alive. Whatever it is, I can’t let her do it. There has to be another way.

I ease myself off the bed as a siren screams into the silence. *One ring.* I shove the piece of paper from my hand into my pocket before steadying myself against the bed as the corridor spins around me. Another wail splits the air, followed by another. *That’s three.* Then another. I try to run to the doors of the clinic, but my body is sluggish and my movements are uncoordinated.

As I reach the door, the fifth ring sounds, and I hear the locks engage. I peer through the circular window and see Emma watching me with tears in her eyes. She smiles, her eyes slipping closed as she takes a deep breath and presses her hand to her heart. For a single second, she looks at peace. When her eyes open, she smiles at me before mouthing the word *boom*.

I scream when the world beyond the door explodes. The building groans, and I feel the ground shaking beneath my feet, but the clinic was designed to withstand a bomb. It’s just that nobody thought about the bomb going off inside the clinic.

I stumble back to the bed and grab the gun and keys, ignoring the tears that stream down my face. My heart is in my throat over what I just witnessed. I hardly knew her, though I’d seen her dozens of times over the years. We never exchanged words or offered smiles to each other, and yet I owe her my life.

The lights go off, snapping me out of my thoughts as I take in the still deserted corridor. The rooms will be locked down now, the people trapped inside assuming an intruder is on the premises. They won't come out until they have been given the all-clear. I should be safe, yet I feel anything fucking but right now.

I move toward the stairwell and come to a halt when the door opens, and out comes one of my bosses—Arthur Smith, a man I hate—followed by none other than James.

“What have you done?” Arthur hisses at me, his white polyester shirt and trousers straining against his rounded belly. “You’ve become more trouble than you’re worth. Get rid of her,” he barks at James before straightening the stupid white Stetson he wears and stepping aside.

James lifts his arm, his hand shaking as he points his gun at me.

“James,” I choke out, taking a step toward him.

“I can’t—” he grits his teeth, his hand still shaking as blood starts to trickle from his nose.

“Just do it,” Arthur yells at him.

I pull my own gun and fire at Arthur three times in rapid succession. One shot goes wide, one hits him in the shoulder, and the other hits him in the head, making him crumble to the floor.

I move my gun so it’s pointed at James, who has blood dripping from his chin. All the blood vessels in his eyes have burst.

“Please, James, don’t make me do this.”

“Can’t fight it,” he hisses, pain etched into every line on his face.

“Please, James, please,” I beg him, my heart breaking as tears run down his face.

“Kill me,” he gasps as his finger tightens on the trigger, and I fire—twice, in case I miss, but this time my aim is true. Two bullets straight to the chest.

The gun falls from his hand as he drops to the ground. I run to him, falling to my knees as I lay my gun beside me and press my hands against his chest.

“Hold on, James. You’re going to be okay.”

He opens his mouth, blood running over his lips. He lifts his hand to cup my cheek.

“Somebody help me,” I scream, even though I know it’s no good. No one can hear me down here.

“It’s okay,” he whispers. “So sorry.”

I press harder on the wounds, trying to keep the blood inside his body, but there's so much of it.

"Tell Astrid—" He coughs, splattering me with blood.

"She already knows. She loves you too. She knows this isn't your fault. None of it was. I just need you to hold on a little longer."

"S okay. It's enough." His breath stutters in his chest for a second before his hand falls from my face. He pulls something black from his pocket, the size of a matchbox, and slips it into my hand. *The tracking device.*

I shove it into my pocket and press my lips to his forehead.

"Thank you."

His eyes close, and one final breath slips through his lips before nothing. I dip my head and sob. He thanked me for shooting him. He knew he couldn't live with himself if he had shot me, but how can he expect me to live with what I've done? I throw my head back and scream. I let all my grief and sorrow erupt from me like a volcano.

It's only when the siren chirps once more that I snap out of it. Emma didn't say anything about the siren going off again. I don't know why it would. Everyone is locked down. Nobody can get out—

"Someone's trying to get in." I grab the gun and stand, slipping in James's blood before righting myself. Carefully, I maneuver around the bodies on the floor and take the stairs, gripping the handrail so I don't fall, and make my way up from the basement level to the ground floor. I crack open the door and peek out. When I find the coast clear, I run towards the lobby and the emergency exit—metal panels covering the main doors.

With the siren already blaring, I don't have to worry about setting it off myself. Praying that I'm right and it works, I type in the code and push the door. When it opens and the alarm shuts off, I let out a sob of relief and pull the door closed behind me, my knees buckling.

I grab the wall for support, freezing when I hear voices. I press myself against the bricks and edge closer to the front of the building as I try to make out what is being said.

Suddenly, I hear a voice I recognize and freeze.

"Get out of my way."

The Boss Man.

"We're in, sir. The system has been deactivated."

"You want to tell me why it took so long?" the Boss Man snaps as I try to breathe as quietly as possible.

“The override code was changed. I’ve had to reset the whole system to get us in.”

Nope that would be me, but him taking credit works in my favor.

“What? By whom?”

“I don’t know, but we can figure that out later. The reset will have opened all interior doors too. If the intruder was locked inside, they’re now free along with everyone else.”

“Find them,” Boss Man orders, and I back away, darting down the alley, using the dumpster for cover.

Once I’m in no danger of being spotted, I take off, running for the cover of trees about a quarter of a mile from the building. My body is still fighting off the effects of the drugs, my head is throbbing from where James hit me, and shock is making my body shake uncontrollably. But I don’t give up, even when I have to stop to throw up. Even when I trip and fall, ripping my pants and the skin on my hands to shreds, I get back up, and I keep moving, feeling twigs tangle in my hair and branches whip across my face.

Eventually, I stumble upon a children’s playground. I look down at myself and know that I can’t walk through there looking like this. It’s quiet, but I can easily make out three or four families.

No, I’ll stick to the tree line and make my way around. I move on autopilot. My only focus is getting to the children. I have to make Emma and James’s sacrifices worth it. I feel more tears flow down my cheeks, making the cuts on my face from the branches sting, but I ignore it.

Pulling out the slip of paper from my pocket that Emma slipped into my hand earlier, I memorize the address, repeating it over and over in case I lose the paper, as I stumble along and push forward.

I don’t know how long I walk, but it feels like hours, though I know it can’t have been more than thirty minutes. The safe houses are kept close to the main site for a reason. If the Division is compromised and we have to abandon ship, they’d want to be able to get to the children as quickly as possible. My only hope is that they haven’t yet. Protocols dictate that they need to clear the building and eliminate any threat first. They’ll also want to make sure it’s not a trap, where they will lead the attacker to the children. Or at least that’s what I’m hoping for.

When I spot the house in the distance, I drop to my knees and weep with relief. I’ve never been so glad that I know the area well, or all this would have been for nothing. Getting to my feet, I half run, half stumble to the

house. As soon as I reach it, I bang my fists against the door over and over until someone answers. A guard opens the door with a gun in his hand. Recognition flares in his eyes before his gaze drops to my bloody hospital gown.

“The building has been compromised. We’re under attack,” I tell him, seeing Lara move up behind him.

“What’s going on?” she asks, her eyes widening when she gets a good look at me.

“Miss, go back inside and round up the children. Be prepared for an evac.” He steps outside and looks around to see if I was followed.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper before smacking him in the back of the head with my gun. Pain reverberates up my arm, making my now mostly healed shoulder throb like a bitch.

“Jesus, Avery, what the hell happened to you?” Lara reaches for me, but I take a step back. I can’t handle kindness right now. If she hugs me, I’ll fall apart.

“Where is the other one?” There are always supposed to be two guards on the children.

“He went to get food. There was nothing here, and the kids were getting upset. Lucky for us, some men can’t handle crying children. He’ll be back soon, though.”

“We need to get out of here. The Boss Man turned up just as I was leaving. He’ll come for the kids next.”

“Shit. Okay. Wait, where’s Emma?”

My face falls, my chest hurting as I picture her on the other side of the glass. “She’s gone.”

“Gone where? Oh no. No, no, no, no,” she curses, yanking her hair.

“She saved me, saved these kids. Let’s not let it all be for nothing.”

“Right.” She breathes, trying to calm herself down, and pulls a flash drive from her pocket and hands it to me. “Here.”

I look at it with a frown.

“Emma told me to give it to you if something were to happen to her.”

I close my eyes and nod, slipping it into my pocket with the tracking device. She looks at me and whips off her sweatshirt before helping me into it.

“You’ll scare the kids looking like that. Hold on.”

She disappears inside before returning with a pack of wipes. She cleans

up my face as carefully as she can, and I try not to flinch when the cuts on my face sting. “Okay, that’s as good as it’s going to get. Let’s get the kids and get the hell out of here. Do you have a plan?”

“Don’t die?”

“Well, it’s a good place to start.”

I follow her into the living room and see the four children that were the current Division residents. Most of the children we find are placed with families or in group homes, which I now know are controlled by the Division. But some are kept onsite—those deemed too dangerous without more training or too vulnerable. Looking at Bella, Emma’s daughter, I realize it has nothing to do with her vulnerability and everything to do with how valuable she is.

“Avery!” she yells when she sees me and runs over, wrapping her arms around my legs, and bursts into tears. I hold her as Lara rushes around getting the other children ready.

“She’s dead, isn’t she?” she asks once her sobs have subsided.

I get down on my knees and dry her tears. “Yeah, sweetheart, she is. But she died a hero. She wanted me to tell you that she loved you so, so much.”

“I know. I saw her.”

I blink back my own tears when I realize that Bella had a vision of her mom’s death. How the fuck do you come back from that?

“I’m going to stay with you, right?”

“Yes, you are, but we need to leave now. It’s not safe.” She nods and runs to put on her shoes and jacket.

Standing, I move over to Noah, an eight-year-old boy who has been with us for about a year. I’m not sure what his gift is, but he’s amazing with numbers. He doesn’t talk, and knowing where he came from, I can understand why. When we found him, he was being kept in a dog cage with a leash around his neck.

I bend down in front of him. “I’m getting you out of here. I know it might seem scary now, but my friends will find us, and they will never let anyone hurt you again.”

He stares at me for a second, and I hold out my hand to him and wait. After a few moments, he slips his hand into mine. I stand as Bella runs back over and takes my other hand.

I look over at Lara, who is holding Delaney’s hand. Delaney is also eight and what the Division called a sensor. She can tell when someone is nearby

because she can sense them before she sees them. Right now, she can't tell if they are friend or foe, but hopefully that will come with age.

Alfie, on the other hand, who is the ten-year-old standing just behind Delaney, has a gift that's already fully developed. He can recall and repeat, word for word, every conversation that has been spoken to him or around him. It sounds convenient in theory. But people can be cruel. Unfortunately, he has no way of ever forgetting the nasty things people have said about him, including those that came from his parents. The Division had a complex name for his gift, but most of us call it the echo.

"Everyone ready?"

I look at Alfie, who has his noise-canceling headphones around his neck. "I know you want to put those on and shut out the world, but I'm asking you to wait until we're safe. I need you to help with the other children, and I need you to listen for any signs of danger. Right now, we're a team, and we need to work together. Can you do that for me?"

He gives me a sharp nod before stepping closer to Lara, who smiles softly at him. Lara is amazing with all the kids. If I didn't know her gifts lay elsewhere, I'd swear she was the child whisperer. But regardless of what her gifts are, her bond with Alfie is undeniable.

"Alright, let's go," Lara says.

"Okay, kids, out the back. Alfie, can you take Noah and Bella for me? I need my hands free." He takes their hands so I can pull my gun.

I push the back door open and make sure the coast is clear before ushering them outside. I point them toward the woods and watch for a minute as they run that way.

"Here." I turn at the sound of Lara's voice, just in time to catch the lighter thrown at me.

"The guard might wake up. Plus, your blood and traces of the kids are in there."

She's right. I step back inside.

"Hurry," she yells as I run into the kitchen, turning on all the dials for the stove and oven. I open the doors and let the gas flow through the house while I look around for something to light.

The drapes in the living room seem like a good place to start. I flick the lighter over and over until the flame jumps up and catches the fabric of the curtains. Unfortunately, because it's a safe house, there is no freaking alcohol, which would help now. Scanning the room, my eyes fall on a large

bottle of hand sanitizer. I'm sure I read somewhere that the stuff was flammable.

"Worth a shot." I grab it and twist the cap off, pouring it over the large oak table. Taking the small throw blanket from the sofa, I flick the lighter, hold it to the blanket, and wait for it to catch fire before tossing it onto the table. I watch as the flames cover the table almost immediately before running out of the house like my life depends upon it. Which I guess it does.

I run into the woods, trying not to break my neck as I catch up to the kids. When I reach them, I stop. Bending over, I try to catch my breath.

"Are you okay?" Lara asks.

"I really need to up my cardio," I say, panting, making her laugh.

"Someone's coming," Delaney says softly, making Lara curse.

"Let's go, let's go," I order, nudging Alfie, who still has a hold of Bella and Noah. We've barely gone a few steps before a large boom rips through the air, followed by another. A huge cloud of smoke and ash erupts into the sky. Thankfully, the trees protect us from the worst of it, but ash still falls like dirty snowflakes, covering our skin.

Bella starts crying, so Alfie wraps his arm around her and pulls her close.

"It's going to be okay, guys. Let's keep moving."

Reluctantly, everyone does as I say. We walk through the woods, looping back around to where I saw the park.

"It's dangerous being this close to the Division, Avery. I thought the idea was to get away," Lara whispers.

"And they'll be looking for us to be doing just that. But I need time for our rescuers to arrive and the safest place to hide the kids—"

"Is with a bunch of other kids. Okay, I get it. You just stay here, though, because you look like you've been hit by a car. I'll stay close to the kids. I promise."

"Okay, you're right. Do you have a cell phone on you?"

"The guards took it when we left for the safe house. Want me to see if one of the parents will let me borrow theirs?"

"Yes, please. I don't know about you, but I'm ready to get the hell out of here."

Chapter Thirty

Creed

Slade, Jagger, and Ev went back to the ranch to question James. With nobody answering their cell phones, all I can do is wait for news while I try to focus on Salem and Astrid, knowing they still need our protection.

“Creed,” Hawk calls my name.

“Anything?”

“Not yet, but the second they have news, E will call. The plane is just down the road. We can be on it and in the air in minutes.”

I swipe my hand over my face. “I can’t lose her again, Hawk. Not when I just got her back.”

“We won’t lose her. Avery is too fucking strong to give up now. Have faith in our woman, jackass, or I’ll hold you down so she can kick your ass when we get her back.”

I blow out a breath and nod. I need to get my shit together. Worrying isn’t going to help anyone right now.

I hear a commotion coming from Salem’s room, but the door stays closed. Looking down the empty corridor, I try to figure out how it came to this. “I don’t get it, Hawk. How did we miss this again? Cooper was one thing, but James?”

“I don’t know, Creed. I don’t get it either. I want to be wrong here. I want Ev to call and say it’s all just a fucked-up mess, but I don’t see how it can be. Nothing else fits.”

The door between us opens, revealing Oz, and in his hands is a wrapped-up baby bawling its eyes out.

“Meet my son,” Oz says reverently.

“Wow. Congrats, Oz.”

Zig walks up behind him, peering over Oz’s shoulder and down at the baby.

“Congrats, Zig. I’m happy for you all.”

“Thanks. Now, fill me in on what’s going on.”

“It can wait—” Hawk starts, but Zig shakes his head, and Oz steps back into the room, taking the baby back to his mother.

“My son is safe. Now I need to make sure the rest of my family is too.”

Fill me in on what you know.”

Hawk gives him the rundown as I peer into the room and watch Oz hand the baby over to Salem, who looks exhausted but happy. He kisses her head before kissing his boy, making me swallow. Will we ever get to do that? Or did I say my last goodbye this morning without even realizing it? Did I tell her I loved her today? Did she forgive me?

Movement snaps me out of my thoughts when I see Astrid pull away from the wall she was leaning against and walk toward me. Her pale skin looks almost translucent, her eyes haunted. I reach for her and pull her into my arms, knocking Zig out of the way. She breaks down and starts sobbing just as Hawk and Zig close in, forming a protective circle around her as she cries.

“Shhh, it’s okay, Astrid.”

“I don’t understand. James wouldn’t do this. I know he wouldn’t. He loves us. All of us.”

I look at Hawk, whose jaw is tight, but he shakes his head, not knowing what to say.

“We don’t know anything for sure yet, Astrid. Let’s not borrow trouble, okay?” She nods against my chest before getting her breathing under control. “Good girl.”

I rub my hands up and down her arms in a soothing gesture. It proves pointless when heavy footsteps sound as they run toward us. I spin around, shoving Astrid behind me, only relaxing when I see Jagger and Ev. I step aside so Jagger can yank Astrid into his arms.

“Tell me what’s going on,” Zig orders.

Ev sits on the floor, ignoring everyone as he types away on his laptop, leaving Jagger to fill us in. “We couldn’t get into the safe room. We were fucking lucky we took Ev with us because he built in a failsafe that overrode the locking mechanism. We would’ve lost Greg otherwise. Slade went with him in the ambulance, and we followed them here. Slade is giving them Greg’s information, and then he’ll be up. Greg was unconscious when we found him. All we know right now is that he’s been shot in the stomach and lost a lot of blood. But he was alive and breathing on his own the last time I saw him.”

Astrid starts crying again, burying her face in Jagger’s chest. He looks at me and shakes his head. “Avery’s gone, and so is James.”

“Fuck!” I spin around and punch the wall, feeling my knuckles split as

Hawk roars out his anguish. Zig grabs him before he can tear the hospital apart.

“I know where she is.” Ev’s voice has us all freezing. He looks up at me, all emotion wiped from his face. “I checked all the trackers in case he took one of our cars. Then I checked the cars. They’re all accounted for except for his.”

“He doesn’t have a tracker on his car?” Jagger asks.

“No, they were fitted before he joined us. But one of the trackers is not where it’s supposed to be. The car is in the garage—I can see it when I pull up the camera feed—but the tracker is in Austin.”

“What does that mean?” Astrid pulls away from Jagger and wipes her eyes.

“It means James took Avery back to the Division, but he took the tracker from the car with him.”

“Why would he do that, though?”

“Because he wants us to find her,” I answer.

“Trap?” Hawk questions.

“Maybe. But he had to know we’d head to the Division for her anyway.”

“Then why bother?” Jagger grunts.

“Because if they move her to an unknown location, we can still find her.”

“He’s helping?” Hawk frowns. “I don’t get it.”

“I have a feeling there is a lot more going on than we realize.” Zig sighs. “Jagger, I need you and Slade to stay here and guard the girls and my son.”

“Son?” Ev looks up from his screen again.

“Yeah, a healthy baby boy.”

“You stay, Zig. Me and Slade can—”

Zig cuts him off before he can finish. “No. Astrid needs you now, just like Salem needed us before. She understands and wants us to bring Avery home safe.” Zig looks at me. “I won’t ask you and Hawk to stay back, but I need you to focus. If you fuck this up and put your woman in danger, I’ll beat you myself.”

He shoves past me and squats down in front of Evander. “I need you here, man. I know it’s not what you want, but it’s what we need. You’re my eyes and ears on the ground and the only person I know who can weave magic under pressure if Salem and my boy need moving.”

Ev tenses but nods his head. Zig leans forward and wraps his hand around the back of Ev’s neck, tugging him until their heads are pressed together.

“We’ll bring her back to you, I promise.”

“I know you will,” Ev answers quietly as Zig pulls back.

“I’ll say bye to Salem and grab Oz. Jagger, call Slade and let him know what’s up. Ev, can you find out what’s going on with Greg and keep us updated?” Ev stands up and nods. “Astrid, I need you to help Salem with the baby. She’s a little overwhelmed and needs her best friend right now.”

“Okay,” she whispers. “Please be safe. I can’t keep saying goodbye to the people I love.”

“Not goodbye, Astrid. Just see you later,” he reassures her.

I move over to Ev. He looks at me, and before he can say anything, I yank him in for a hug. “We’ll find her. There is no other option.”

I feel Hawk walk over to us, so I pull back, letting Hawk give Ev a one-handed hug. “Creed’s right. We’ve done this a thousand times.”

“But never for the woman I love. And I do. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to be sorry. We love her too.”

“Trust us to bring our girl home, E,” Hawk says quietly.

“I do. I’m just scared out of my fucking mind.”

“We all are, but if Avery can hold her shit together, then we can too.”

“How do you know she is?”

Hawk stares at him. “She stepped in front of a bullet for Creed. That woman has bigger balls than all of us.”

“She’s also stubborn as shit. She won’t let them win,” I add, seeing Ev’s shoulders relax a little.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

A nurse interrupts us. “Excuse me. A call just came through.” She looks at Zig and smiles. “Salem’s sister called. She said she’s sorry she couldn’t make it, but she’s stuck at the park with the kids and asked if anyone would be willing to go pick her up.”

We all stare at her in shock for a second before Ev is back on the floor with his laptop in his lap. “Thank you. We’ll get right on it.”

“You’re welcome.” She turns and walks back to the nurses’ station at the end of the corridor.

“Talk to me, Ev,” Zig mutters.

“Avery’s phone was on the kitchen table.”

“And?”

“How many people’s cell numbers do you know by heart?”

I think about it. “Probably just my own. And even that’s questionable.”

“Same,” Hawk admits.

“Oz and Salem’s,” Zig says as Oz walks up.

“What?”

“How many cell phone numbers do you know?”

“From my cell? All of them.” We all look at him in disbelief, but he just shrugs. “I lose my phone a lot.”

“Avery won’t know anyone’s number without her phone,” Ev states as he types. “But it’s easy enough to find the number for the hospital and leave a message for one of the new parents in the maternity ward. Here, the tracker’s showing she’s in this area. But with so many fucking trees, it was hard to pinpoint her exact location. But there is only one playground close by. I’m sending the coordinates to your phones. Go get our woman and bring her home.”

* * *

We are on the plane and in the air within thirty minutes. I’m just praying we make it in time.

“Wilder and Crew are on their way back. It might be overkill, but I’d rather be safe than sorry,” Oz says as he takes the seat in front of us.

I nod. “Smart.”

Hawk looks at Oz. “Not used to seeing you on this side of the cockpit.”

“Zig jumped right back into flying after we crashed, but I’ll admit, I don’t enjoy it like I used to. We came too fucking close to dying for me to just shake it off.”

“Reassuring coming from the copilot,” Hawk jokes, making me laugh.

“Beggars can’t be choosers.”

My cell chimes, so I pull it out and see a message from Ev. “Greg’s out of surgery. The bullet didn’t hit anything vital. Doctor said if anyone was to ever get shot, it was one of the best places to get hit.”

“Then why was he out of it for so long?” Hawk questions.

I text Ev to ask and wait for his response. Within seconds, my phone chimes. “He hit his head when he fell. The loss of blood was the biggest concern. Docs say he should make a full recovery, though.”

“Thank fuck,” Oz groans.

“James was a cop. He’d know exactly where he needed to shoot to kill,

but he didn't. Why?"

Oz shakes his head. "I don't know, Creed. I wish I did."

Another chime on my cell with a message that has a link to a news station. "Hold on. Ev just sent me something else." I click the link and wait for it to open before turning the volume up for the others to hear.

Reports are saying it was a gas leak that caused the explosion, but the chief of police has yet to issue a statement. So far, nine people have been confirmed dead in what locals are calling a tragic accident.

"Holy shit," Oz curses. "Is that where they took Avery?"

"I'm assuming so. Ev sent me the link for a reason."

"Okay, I'm going to let Zig know what's going on. You might want to buckle in. He told me to tell you we'll be landing in ten. The closest Ev could get us was a private airstrip used by an AG Aviation School. Ev said it was an emergency, and since they aren't open today, we've been granted permission to land there. It's twelve miles from the park, but there's a school bus onsite," he calls out as he heads back to Zig.

I strap in and look at Hawk. "I'm never letting her out of my sight again." He blows out a breath. "Tell me about it."

"Creed, she said she was at the park with kids. Nobody's mentioned it, but I have to ask what the fuck we're supposed to do with a bunch of kids. I mean, are we talking two or twenty?"

"I don't know, Hawk, but we'll figure it out. Anywhere is better than what they've had, right?"

"Yeah, you're right. It's just them losing Salem, Astrid, and Avery is one thing, but losing the kids too... They'll never leave us alone."

"Then maybe it's time we bring the fight to them for a change."

Hawk straps in when the plane starts to descend. Neither of us says anything else, both of us preparing for what's to come.

When the plane lands and comes to a stop, we unbuckle and open the door, climbing out before Oz and Zig. I spot the bus outside the hangar and head for it, wondering if I'm going to have to hot-wire the damn thing. When I get there, I realize the doors are not only open, but the keys are in the ignition.

"Gotta love small-town living." Hawk laughs, climbing in behind me.

"It's not exactly a small town."

"The middle of nowhere still counts," Oz says, climbing in with Zig right behind him.

“All that’s out here are fields and barns,” he adds as the doors close.

“You know where you’re going?” Zig asks from where he stands beside me.

“Yeah. Just keep your eye out for any issues.”

I turn the key and breathe a sigh of relief when the bus rumbles to life. My cell dings as I’m driving. I ignore it, but a few seconds later, Zig’s chimes too.

“It’s Ev. They’re evacuating the area until they know for sure what caused the explosion. The park is within the evacuation zone. You need to step on it.”

I floor it, ignoring the curses behind me, and focus on getting to Avery. It takes a little over ten minutes before we pull up at the park. Families are huddled together as they leave, making me think they’ve heard about the evacuation. I spot a familiar face and breathe a sigh of relief. “Over there.”

I park and yank the doors open. Jumping out, I run toward Avery, the guys right behind me.

“Avery!” I yell.

She turns around at the sound of her name, and when she spots me, she starts running for me too. And we collide, our arms wrapping around each other. “You came for me,” she gasps into my neck before Hawk wraps his arms around us both.

“I love you. I love you both so, so much.”

“Jesus, fuck,” he groans, squeezing tightly.

“We love you too, baby,” I say, pulling back just enough to look into her eyes before placing my lips against hers.

“It’s good to see you, sweetheart, but we’ve got to go,” Zig says from behind us.

Reluctantly, I release her, and she turns back to the playground. “Come on, we’re getting out of here.”

A woman that’s all curves steps forward, surrounded by a few kids. “Avery?”

“It’s okay, Lara, these are my husbands, and the two behind them are my brothers.” She walks over to the kids, reaching out her hand. One of the boys takes it as she urges the others to follow. We walk beside them to the bus, scanning the area for unfriendlies as we go, and stand back as the scared kids board.

We climb in after them, and this time, Oz drives so I can be with Avery.

“Alright, everyone, take your seats,” the woman Avery called Lara shouts, and thankfully, the kids listen.

I take my seat and pull Avery down onto my lap and hold her. Hawk sits as close to us as he can, smoothing her hair back from her face.

“James?” Hawk asks quietly as the bus starts moving.

Avery shakes her head, tears gathering in her eyes. “He’s gone. I’ll tell you all of it later, but I just can’t right now.”

“Shh, it’s alright, baby. Just rest. We’ve got you.”

I hold her tightly and rock her, staring at Hawk, whose expression mirrors how I feel—love, relief, fear, and worry.

“Call Ev. Tell him we have our girl, and we’re on our way home.”

Epilogue

Avery

A week has passed since we came home. A week of my men not leaving my side. A week of nightmares that have me waking the whole house with my screams. I want to be stronger than this. I want to process the shit that happened and move on. But every time I close my eyes, all I see is James's face.

I pull the blanket tighter around my shoulders and sip my cooling coffee as I stare at the mountains, hoping to find peace. But all I feel is lost. Lost and scared of my own damn shadow. I swipe away the tear that slips free, angry that there are even tears left to fall. I sniff when I hear the door crack open and wipe my face with the blanket.

Turning when I hear the pitter-patter of little footsteps, I offer a smile to Bella and place my mug on the ground before opening the blanket wide. Bella takes the invitation and curls up in my lap, her head under my chin, her fingers latching onto a strand of my hair. Neither of us speaks. We just take comfort in each other. My guilt over her losing her mom is eating me alive, and I know there is nothing I can say or do to make it better.

“Will I live with you now?”

“Do you want to?”

She tips her head back to look at me, her eyes so like her mother's—I'm surprised I didn't notice it before. She nods.

“Can I have a mermaid room?”

I smile. “If you like.”

“Avery?”

“Yes, sweetie?” I smooth her hair back from her face.

“Don't be sad anymore.”

I pull her to my chest so she can't see me cry. “I'll try.”

“Do you miss your mommy too?”

“I miss lots of people, but then I remember that they're looking down and watching over us.”

“I don't think they'd like to watch you be all sad. That's kind of boring.”

I can't help the laugh that breaks free. “Is that so?” I tickle her, making her laugh.

“Yup. I think it would make them happy to see us smile and dance and make funny faces. Oh, and they will love to see my mermaid room.”

“You’re right, they will.”

We both turn when the door opens again and a disheveled Ev walks out.

“I wondered where my favorite girls were,” Ev says as he comes to sit beside us.

“You were snoring on the sofa,” Bella tells him, making me chuckle.

“Was I?”

“Uh-huh. How come you don’t have a bed?”

“I do. It’s just not here. I live in that house over there.”

Bella follows his finger and frowns.

“But you have to live with us now. I don’t want you to be by yourself.” She crawls out of my lap and into E’s.

He looks freaked out for a second, his hands in the air like he doesn’t know what to do, but when she settles down and lays her head against his chest, I see the exact moment my man falls in love with another girl.

“I’ll talk to Creed and Hawk. I’m sure if we asked them nicely, they’d let me stay,” he murmurs to her softly.

“You could have a mermaid bedroom like me.”

“Ooh, nice, but I’m more of a space boy myself. A bedroom full of stars sounds fun.”

“Can I come see it?”

“Of course.”

She nods happily before closing her eyes. Ev looks at me and reaches out with his free arm to pull me closer. I wrap the blanket around all of us and lay my head against his shoulder.

“You should have woken me.”

“You barely sleep as it is.”

“Wake me anyway. Or Creed, or Hawk. Don’t carry this alone, Avery. Let us help you.”

“I’m not sure you can. I’m trying to wrap my head around it all. Trying to understand why I’m here and they’re not. Why me and not them, Ev? I’m not special.”

“Yes, you are, and don’t ever let me hear you say otherwise.” He blows out a breath before kissing my head. “I think today’s the day for talking. We’ve given you time, but I think keeping it all bottled up is eating you from the inside out.”

I want to argue that I'm not ready to open my mouth and let all the horror out, but it's not just about me. If I'm planning on keeping these kids safe, then I need to deal with my shit. "Okay. Will you call everyone? I'll ask Lara to watch the kids."

"I'll do it now. It'll give everyone a chance to get up and get dressed."

I bite my lip. "What about Astrid?"

"I'll leave that up to her to decide. Just know that if she doesn't come, it's not because she's mad at you. She's just not ready to hear it."

I nod, even though I'm not sure I believe him.

"Trust me, Avery."

"I love you," I blurt out. "I should have told you before, but I was scared. I never want you to doubt how I feel about you."

"I love you too, Avery. More than I ever thought possible."

* * *

I'm going to throw up. I swallow down the bile rushing up my throat and try to get my breathing back under control, but with all eyes on me, it's impossible.

"Hey, hey, look at me, Avery." Hawk kneels in front of me and cups my face. "That's it. Just focus on us—me and you. Nothing else. Now take a deep breath for me and blow it out."

I do as he says, and though it's shaky, it helps.

"Good girl. And again."

I suck in another breath and blow it out slowly.

"Better?"

I nod rapidly.

"Good." He picks me up and sits me down on his lap as E and Creed crowd in on either side of me.

I look around the room and take in the faces watching me, not with anger but with concern. Zig and Oz sit with Salem between them, their little boy Aries asleep on her chest. Across from them are Crew and Wilder, and directly opposite us are Slade and Jagger, with Astrid sitting in Slade's lap. I can't meet her eyes. I don't want to see the blame and hatred in her stare. I'm ready to beg for forgiveness when the door opens and Greg walks in slowly.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Zig asks as everyone stands.

Greg ignores them all and heads straight for me. When he stops, he takes in my tear-stained face and wraps his arms around me. And that's when I cry another bucket-worth of tears. I'm going to end up dehydrated at this rate, but I'm just so glad he's okay.

"I'm so sorry, darlin'. I was supposed to keep you safe," he murmurs into my hair.

"It wasn't your fault," I tell him, pulling back.

"Come on, old man, come snuggle with me before you fall over," Wilder teases, taking Greg's arm and leading him over to the sofa he was sitting on.

"Old man, my ass," he grumbles, but he doesn't put up a fight.

"You overdo it, and I'll take you back to the hospital myself," Zig warns him, but Greg waves him off.

Zig's eyes return to me. "I know this is hard, and you've been to hell and back, but we need to know all the details."

"I'll start," Greg says, giving me a couple more minutes. "We were in the safe room waiting for news on Salem when James arrived with a bag from the bakery in his hand. I didn't think anything of it. I just opened the door, and he pulled a gun from the bag and shot me."

Astrid whimpers, but she doesn't say anything.

"His blood was on the croissant," I whisper, still seeing it in my head. "I watched it play out, but that's all my brain managed to take in before James hit me with the gun. When I woke up, I was lying on a bed, but not like a hospital bed, like one you get in an ambulance. A gurney?"

Zig nods, so I continue.

"Emma was there. Um, Emma Snow." I look at Creed, who reaches out and takes my hand. "She told me that they were going to impregnate me using eggs they'd harvested from me while I was having my wisdom teeth out when I was nineteen. Eggs that they had fertilized by an unknown male, most likely one that was gifted."

Hawk goes rock solid underneath me, so I lean back into him, reminding him I'm here and safe.

"She did something earlier in the day that resulted in the kids getting moved to a safe house. She slipped me the paper with the address before telling me the keys for the interior doors and a gun were under my pillow."

"How did she know you were going to be there?"

"They told her. They didn't feel the need to keep information from her when they knew how to keep her in line." I run my fingers along the slit in

the knee of my jeans. “Emma was Bella’s mom,” I tell them. I’d already told E, Creed, and Hawk, of course, but the others had no idea what the little girl had lost. “They blackmailed her using Bella.”

“Fucking assholes,” Astrid curses.

I look up at her for the first time and stare into her pretty purple eyes. “When James went to visit his grandchildren, he was grabbed by the Division,” I tell her, charging the atmosphere in the room. “They put a chip in his head. I’m sorry, I don’t know all the details, but it basically turned him into their puppet.”

“He wasn’t a bad guy,” she says softly, not a question but a statement of fact because she knew and loved him.

“No. He wasn’t a bad guy. He just got caught in a bad situation. Anyway, he asked Emma to come up with a plan because he knew they were going to use him, and he would be powerless to stop it.”

I shake my head. “I’m getting ahead of myself. Let me back up a bit. Emma told me what they wanted to do to me and pretended to prepare me for the procedure, but she was really telling me what I needed to do. When the orderly came in to get me, she accompanied us to the clinic, but she made him leave when lockdown protocols were initiated.”

“Reports said people heard sirens going off before the explosion,” Oz states.

“Emma did something. I don’t know how, but she set it off. It wasn’t a fire alarm, though I guess most people would think it was because of the explosion. It was the alarm for an unauthorized intruder.”

“Which would trigger the building going into a lockdown, whereas a fire would have it being evacuated.” Wilder sighs, and I nod.

“According to protocol, after five bells, the doors lock. Emma warned me that I had the interior keys, but the exterior doors had a code she didn’t have. She told me to hide if I wasn’t out in time and wait for the lockdown to be lifted before going for the children. Then she closed herself in the clinic a second before the locks engaged.”

“She locked herself in on purpose. Why?” Crew leans forward.

I look over at him and feel my lip tremble, remembering the look of peace on her face. “She knew too much. She was just as valuable as everything in the clinic. She went out with all the samples, all the research, and all the doctors involved.” I wipe my eyes and carry on. “I took the gun and keys, but as I was heading for the stairs, Arthur and James showed up.”

“Arthur?” Salem frowns.

“One of my bosses. Arthur Smith. An asshole that always wears a white shirt and pants and a—”

“White Stetson,” Salem whispers, making me look at her.

“You know him?”

“Colonel Sanders. He was at the clinic I was taken to after we were rescued. I’d hoped he’d died in the explosion.”

“Cockroaches always survive,” Oz mutters.

“Not this time,” I tell them, and Astrid looks at me.

“You shot him three times.”

I jolt at her words but nod. “The first shot went wide, but the others hit him. I killed him, and I’m not sorry.”

“Good,” she replies. “I saw a flash of you killing someone and feeling no remorse. Now I know why. I also saw you crying over James, trying to stop the bleeding.”

I squeeze Creed’s hand so hard that my fingers cramp. “Arthur ordered him to kill me. I shot Arthur, hoping James would be released from his hold, but it didn’t override his command. James tried to stop himself. He was bleeding from his nose and eyes...” I shake my head. “I begged him to fight, and he tried. God, he tried, but his finger tightened around the trigger, and I... I...”

“You shot him,” Astrid says softly, and I nod as I sob out my *yes* before burying my face in my hands.

It’s Astrid’s hand stroking my hair that has me looking up, her tears mirroring mine.

“He loved you,” I blurt out. “He wanted me to tell you that.”

Tears slide down her face, and she nods before taking a deep breath. “You did the right thing. He wouldn’t have been able to live with himself if he’d killed you.”

“I know, but I hate myself anyway.”

“Don’t, Avery. He wouldn’t have wanted that.” I nod, knowing she’s right.

Astrid walks back over to Jagger and climbs into his lap, his arms wrapping around her as she cries into his neck.

“There was no fear in his eyes, only acceptance. He was relieved. He thanked me. Can you believe that? He thanked me for shooting him as he gave me the tracker so you could find me.” I whisper.

“He didn’t thank you for shooting him, Avery. He thanked you for setting him free,” Ev says, and I turn to look at him.

His thumb swipes across my lip. “What you did to Arthur was one thing, but shooting James, a man you considered a friend... That’s so much harder. You are the most courageous person I know, sweetheart, and we’re sitting in a room full of people that impress me every day.”

I gasp and jump up. “The thumb drive! I forgot. Emma left a thumb drive with Lara for me. It’s in the jeans I was wearing.”

He stands and grips my shoulders gently. “I’ll grab it in a minute. Finish your story first.”

I blow out a breath and nod as he kisses my temple. I sit back down and sigh when Hawk wraps his arms around me once more. “I stayed with him until he was gone. I couldn’t just leave him, but then the alarm started blaring again.”

“Why?”

“Someone was trying to override the lockdown. I used them getting in as a cover to get out because I didn’t know if I would set any alarms off myself.”

“So, when they got in, you slipped out.” Crew nods.

“No. Not quite. I got out before they regained control, then moved closer because I could hear them talking.”

“You what?” Creed curses.

“I know, I’m sorry, but I didn’t know if it was you all coming for me.”

“Did you see who it was?”

I shake my head. “No, I didn’t get close enough. But I recognized his voice. It was the main boss. Or the Boss Man, as we all referred to him. I have no idea what his real name is. The orderly had told Emma he was on his way. I think that’s why she did what she did.”

“How did you get out before they got in?” Salem asks, rubbing Aries’s back.

“They didn’t know the override code.”

“How is that possible?” Hawk asks.

“Because somebody changed it without telling anyone.”

“Then how did you know it?” Zig asks.

“I remembered something Cooper said to me the day he left me behind.

You might not need it today or tomorrow—maybe you’ll never need it at all—but if you do, if you find yourself locked down, then the 8-digit key is

home. Do you understand? Home, not the house—your heart.”

“What the fuck?” Slade frowns.

“Apex?” Astrid asks.

“It’s not eight digits,” Jagger murmurs.

“Oh yeah. I don’t get it then.”

“I almost didn’t either, and I wouldn’t have if it weren’t for my time in the war room looking over case files.”

“What was it?” Creed rubs his thumb over the back of my hand.

“72677487. It’s the numeric version of Scorpius, your codename. Apex was just a place. You guys are my home.”

“Why would Cooper do that? I’m so fucking confused,” Jagger growls.

“He cared about you. He was your Penn Travis, after all, and someone once told me that not everyone is all bad or all good. Even bad men can do good things occasionally,” Greg tells me with a small smile.

I lean back and nod, filling them in on everything that happened afterward—from making my way to the safe house to blowing it up.

“I’m glad you made it home safely, Avery,” Astrid tells me gently.

“Me too,” Salem agrees. “I’m sorry about James and Emma.”

“I don’t know what to say to Bella. She knows. She had a vision. But I just feel so guilty.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Zig tells me.

I open my mouth to argue but snap it shut when he gives me a hard look.

“It wasn’t your fault, Avery. It was because of the boss, not you.”

“You’re right, but she told me—” I snap my mouth shut, remembering one more piece of information I need to give them.

“Told you what?” Ev repeats.

I wince. “That they couldn’t impregnate me because I’m already pregnant,” I whisper.

I’m suddenly whirled around so that I’m facing all three of my men, who look at me with varying degrees of hope and shock.

“You’re pregnant?” Ev repeats.

I bite my lip and nod.

“With a baby?” Hawk questions, making me frown.

“No, with a kangaroo.” Creed elbows him. “How, when?” he asks as an afterthought.

“How? Really?” I lift my eyebrow.

“I mean—”

I take pity on him because I know what he means. “The cabin,” I tell him softly, because it’s the only time I could have gotten pregnant. I was on antibiotics and it messed with my birth control.

His eyes widen, and Hawk curses.

“I’m sorry. Jesus, Avery, we didn’t think,” Creed apologizes.

“Don’t leave,” Hawk growls out, panic coating his words.

“I’m not leaving, and you don’t need to be sorry. I want this baby.”

I turn to look at Ev, and bite my lip. He cups my jaw and leans forward to kiss me.

“So, we’re gonna be dads, huh?”

I blow out a relieved breath and nod, feeling tears prick my eyes again, but this time with relief.

“I can’t wait,” he whispers, as everyone around us takes that as their cue to congratulate and hug me.

“Thank God you added Ev to your team,” Greg says loudly, making us all turn to look at him.

He points at Hawk and Creed and grins. “You should have seen these two dumbasses when they realized Salem was in labor.”

I burst into laughter because he’s not wrong.

“Heyy,” Creed calls out.

Ev looks at me and winks as Hawk’s hands move to cover my stomach.

“It’s true. You should have seen their faces.” Salem chuckles.

“You were leaking,” Hawk complains, making us all laugh harder.

My cell chimes, so I pull it out and find a message from Lara. “Any chance we can finish this up later? The kids are hungry.”

“Oh, my goodness. Of course. Zig, take Aries. I’m going to make food for everyone.”

Zig lifts his son and holds him against his shoulder.

“Don’t overdo it, woman.” Oz slaps her ass when she stands up.

She turns and glares at him before stomping off.

“I’m glad you’re home, Avery,” Zig tells me, and I smile.

“Me too, Zig.” With that, he leaves the room, and everyone else files out behind him.

Astrid gives me a sad smile as she leaves with Slade’s arm around her and Greg bends down to kiss my cheek before he hobbles after them.

Ev stands and tugs me to my feet, and Hawk and Creed move to stand beside me.

“Are you sure you’re all okay with this?”

“Shocked, but more than okay.” Hawk presses a kiss to my temple.

I look at Ev, seeing nothing but love and acceptance on his face.

“I want us all to live together. The four of us, the baby, and Bella.” Nobody says anything. I keep my eye on Ev, who I think is waiting to see how Creed and Hawk react.

“We’ll need to add an extension,” Creed says.

“We’ll get the architect in to draw up plans,” Hawk replies, and my heart tugs when a beautiful smile spreads across Ev’s face.

“There are two properties sitting empty right now that are bigger than what the three of us already have. One was for Oz and Zig, but they opted to stay in the main house, and the other was for Luna when she stays, but I don’t think she’d mind if we took it.”

“Really?”

“Really. It has a huge room that was designed for her and her men, three additional bedrooms, and a couple of extra bathrooms. Otherwise, the layout is mostly the same.”

“I’m game if you guys are.” Creed nods.

“Sounds good to me. Not sure I want to wake up spooning one of you two assholes, though,” Hawk grumbles, making me snort.

“I’ll save you the misery and take on one of the other bedrooms. It can double as my home office.” Ev grins.

Hawk jumps in. “Hey, I was kidding. You’re as much a part of this as me and Creed are.”

“I’m starting to get that, but I’ve gotta draw the line at sharing a bed with you two. Look, I’m cool with it, I promise. I don’t sleep much anyway. Avery can split her time between us however she sees fit. I…” He scrunches up his face, making him look adorable. Not that I’d tell him that. Badasses are offended by the word *adorable*, apparently.

“I like space,” he finishes, bracing himself.

“If you’re sure. We can always revisit this conversation later if you change your mind.” Hawk slaps him on the back before heading for the door. “I wonder if Salem is gonna make pancakes?”

“You’re sure?” Ev looks between me and Creed.

“Ev, man, I’ll let you into a little secret. There are no rules when it comes to making this work. We messed everything up before, so now we’re just letting things happen. And that means taking care of each other’s needs

without forcing shit. If you need your space, then you need your space. You don't have to justify dick to us."

Ev blows out a relieved breath as I lean into him. "We'll make it work. I promise."

He nods and kisses my nose. "Can I be the one to tell Bella?"

I laugh. "Go for it."

He walks away. "Hey, does anyone know what a mermaid room looks like?" I hear him ask before he disappears.

Creed's large hands move to my hips before coming around to rest on my stomach. "Thank you." He dips his head and kisses the side of my neck, making me shiver.

"For what?"

"For everything. For loving us. For making three dumbasses the happiest dumbasses on the planet."

I turn and wrap my hands around his neck. "Anytime."

* * *

I take in all the people eating and laughing and feel James's loss weighing heavily on me. The kids have all finished eating and have piled onto the sofa, where they are watching cartoons. Lara is sitting between Wilder and Crew, who are looking at her like she's the answer to all their problems. Lara, meanwhile, looks like she wants to hide under the table.

Getting up, I walk into the kitchen and pour myself a glass of juice. I lean against the counter and take a drink. Suddenly, I feel someone step up beside me.

I jump, making Astrid laugh. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"No, it's fine. I just thought you were in the bathroom, and I guess I'm also still a little on edge."

"That's understandable."

"I'm so sorry about James."

"I know you are, but you've got to stop beating yourself up about it. There was nothing else you could do. You did what James wanted. You saved yourself and your baby, and then you got all those kids out. I won't say I'm not heartbroken because I am, but that doesn't change the fact that I'm so freaking glad you're here. That you all are," she says, looking over at the

kids, who are arguing over the remote control.

When the news comes on, I recognize the building the reporter is standing in front of and slowly walk over to the television so I can hear better.

Officials are ruling it an accident. The death toll has now risen to fifteen, with another eight people still unaccounted for.

“Hey guys, do you want to play outside for a little while?”

They all turn to look at me, and the noise around the table dies down.

“I’ll take them, Avery,” Lara offers, walking over.

“We’ll come too.” Crew gets up with Wilder right behind him.

“We won’t ever go back, right?” Alfie asks me.

It’s Zig who stands up and answers, Salem clutching his hand tightly as they both walk over to us. “Never. This is your home now, too, and you’re all welcome to stay here for as long as you want.”

“They’ll come for us,” Alfie tells him, fisting his hands at his side.

“They can try,” Oz says, moving toward Alfie and bending down so he’s eye-to-eye with him. “Nobody is coming into my home and taking my family away from me. Nobody.”

“Will you teach me how to fight?” Alfie asks, and I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from crying.

“Yes. Of course, I’ll teach you all how to fight.”

“And we’ll see if we can figure out how to use your gifts to your advantage to keep you safe,” Astrid adds gently.

Alfie looks around and nods as Noah climbs off the sofa and hides behind my legs.

“Are you okay, little man?”

He points at the television. We all look toward it, but it’s Salem that gasps. “Oh my God. That’s him. That’s my Penn Travis.”

I look at Salem and fight back the urge to throw up. “Are you sure?”

“Of course. I’d never forget his face. Why?”

“Because that’s the Boss Man.”

“Holy shit,” someone curses as Ev walks over to me.

“I think it’s time I took a look at that thumb drive.”

I nod absently, knowing somehow that this changes everything. Being hunted and used by the government is one thing, but being hunted and used by one of your own... Well, that makes the betrayal so much worse.

I look over at Lara, who stands frozen, her face a ghostly shade of white.

“Lara, what’s wrong?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

Bella walks over and takes her hand. “Is it because you’re scared of your dad?”

Lara swallows before gripping the back of the sofa with her free hand for support.

“Your dad?” I frown, looking between Lara and Bella.

“I don’t have a dad,” Lara chokes out, making Bella frown in confusion.

“Sure, you do. He’s right there.” She points at the Boss Man on the screen, and Lara’s face falls in defeat.

Wilder and Crew take a step away from her, making me want to smack them upside the head.

“Lara?” I move closer to her. She looks at me with tears in her eyes. “Is it true?”

She nods. “But he isn’t just my father.” She glances at Salem and bites her lip. “He’s yours too.”

The room goes deathly quiet. Even the kids are silent.

“You’re my sister?” Salem whispers, and Lara nods. Tears stream down Salem’s face. But before she can do anything else, the guys are in front of her.

“Then I guess the question is, are you here to help us or hurt us?” Wilder growls, and something tells me he’s talking about more than Apex.

She lets go of Bella’s hand and crosses her arms over her chest. “I would never do anything to hurt these kids.”

I notice she didn’t say she wouldn’t hurt us adults, though. But I keep my mouth shut.

“Yeah, and why should we believe you?” Crew huffs.

“Because I’m one of these kids.”

“Lara, how old are you?” Zig asks quietly as she swipes a tear from her cheek.

Her eyes slip closed before she whispers, “Seventeen.”

Wilder and Crew back up farther, but now their expression doesn’t show anger, just guilt. And suddenly, everything’s just become a whole lot more fucked up.

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About the Author

Candice is a romance writer who lives in the UK with her long-suffering partner and her three slightly unhinged children. As an avid reader herself, you will often find her curled up with a book from one of her favorite authors, drinking her body weight in coffee.

