



A DARK ROMANCE

Unexpected
RETURNS

BOOK NINE

FINDING MY HOME SERIES

NIKITA PARMENTER

Unexpected Returns (Finding My Home)

Book 9

Nikita Parmenter

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PIRACY IS STEALING!!

Thank you for respecting the hard work of the author

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Chapter one

I watch as Rafe and Riot rush forward and catch my very dead mother as carefully as they possibly can before they gently lower her to the floor and then take a step back, their eyes like everyone else's are on me.

So before anyone can say anything, I decide to address the elephant in the room, "I will deal with this later, but for now, we should probably disarm the still very active bomb that is attached to my very dead mother," as always bluntness is my choice when it comes to difficult situations.

"You got it, Princess," Atlas replies, knowing me well enough by now to know that I mean what I say and also knowing that we are in a really fucking precarious situation.

You know, one where we could get blown up.

"Ace, this one is on you," Trick orders.

"I've got it. Can someone go and get my tool kit from the car?" Ace asks as he crouches down next to the body and starts to carefully look over the bomb without touching anything.

"I'll go," Malachi replies, rushing out of the restaurant. Fortunately for us, the cars aren't parked too far away.

Because I'm looking out of the front window, I see several black SUVs pull up outside of the restaurant and effectively block it from the view of the now very curious public. Agents start to stream out of the vehicles, pushing civilians further back and setting up barriers. I have to admit that I am always impressed at just how good they are at their jobs and clearing an area in a matter of minutes.

"Ever, go and talk to the agents and fill them in on what is going on in here," Trick orders me, knowing that I need something to do and to keep myself busy with so I don't spiral.

"Got it," I reply, moving around the body and starting to make my way toward the door.

"Jynx, you go with her." Trick replies.

I pause as something occurs to me, and I turn back around, my eyes

locking on a worried looking Rylie, “You need to get out of here before anyone starts to get suspicious.”

“She’s right,” Jensen agrees gently.

“I’m not going fucking anywhere, not right now, I’ll deal with the fucking consequences later,” Rylie replies fiercely.

“Are you sure?” Trick asks. Rylie nods, so he adds, “Fine, try and stay as far out of the limelight as possible. Hopefully, no one will bother asking any questions because of who we are.”

“Got it,” Rylie replies, and I watch as she practically fades into the group of the others. She’s there, but she doesn’t stand out as different, and it’s fucking impressive, actually.

I don’t bother saying anything else or arguing with her; she’s big enough to make her own decisions, and if she thinks that it’s worth the risk of staying here, then that’s up to her. I do appreciate her support though, and I’m sure when my mind isn’t spinning quite so much, I will appreciate it even more.

I’m aware that I have several worried eyes following me, but we really don’t have time for this. More than that, I don’t have time to worry about what just happened and how I’m probably not reacting how most people would. I will have time to analyze and assess it all later, and I know I won’t be doing it alone, and I can talk it through with the guys and, most likely, Jynx. For my own sanity, though, I just can’t do it now.

Jynx stays silent at my side as we walk through the now deserted restaurant and out of the front doors, moving out of the way of Malachi as he rushes back inside with Ace’s kit and immediately coming face to face with Mr Rising and Alaric.

“Are you okay, Ever?” Alaric asks me. He knows more of my history where my mother is concerned and all of the complicated emotions that come along with it, although Mr R looks just as worried as he does.

I nod, “I will be. I just need to focus on what is happening now.”

They share a look, but then, Mr R’s expression changes to his work mode one, and he asks, “Quickly tell us what happened then?”

I can’t help but sigh in relief. I really didn’t want to get into this cluster fuck of a situation right now, not in any other capacity other than work.

“We were coming to the end of our dinner when a woman approached the table. Her face was completely covered; she said my name and then said, ‘He says this is just the beginning, and he doesn’t take kindly to losing. Butterfly, help me.’” I repeat the words that Amelia said to me; I think that they may

always be ingrained in my mind from this point onwards. “Because of the nickname that she used, I knew who she was. I asked her for clarification on who she was talking about, and she confirmed that it was Hunt. The guys started to get up to contain her, but she panicked, ripped her head coverings off, and also revealed that she was strapped with a bomb, which obviously stalled our progress. She looked like she wanted to say something else, but before she could, she was shot through the head. I heard the bullet embed in the wall behind me, so hopefully, forensics can get some information from it.”

“Rafe and Riot caught her before she hit the floor,” Jynx adds, “preventing the bomb from potentially going off from the impact of landing. Ace is now working out how to disarm it.”

Mr R is still watching me, and he reaches into his suit jacket, pulls out a small pack of wet wipes, and then offers me one. I could hug him. I had no idea how much it was bothering me that I had her blood on my face, but as soon as I started cleaning it off, I felt an immense amount of relief.

“Thank you,” I quietly say.

He nods and then switches back to work, “Okay, we’ll have agents scouring the area to see where the shot came from. We’ll also send some teams out to clear the nearest buildings just in case it goes off.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that with Ace on it,” Jynx replies, making Mr R smile.

“I’m sure that’s true; we’re well aware of his skills but it is protocol and we need to follow it,” Mr R replies.

“I understand that,” Jynx adds.

“You two need to get back in there. I’m assuming that there’s no point telling you that you should all clear out and leave Ace to diffuse it?” Alaric tries, even though he knows the answer.

“Not a chance in hell,” I reply firmly.

“Fuck no,” Jynx replies at the same time.

Alaric smiles, although the worry doesn’t leave his eyes as he replies, “I didn’t think so. Here,” he hands me an earpiece, “I have the other one; keep us updated. I’m going to have some fun with the local law enforcement.”

I smirk at that.

“Alaric, please don’t rile them up any more than they already are because we’re on their turf and not telling them anything,” Mr R orders, although we can all see the amusement in his eyes and the smile playing around the edge

of his lips.

“Yes sir,” Alaric grins, the expression not reassuring in the slightest.

He’s absolutely going to rile them up, and Mr R is going to have to do some mediation.

“I’ll stay in contact and let you know when it’s safe,” Ever replies.

Mr R nods, and just before we turn around and head back into the restaurant, he adds, “Has Rylie taken off?”

I shake my head, “No, we told her too, and she outright refused. She’s good at blending into the surroundings and the group, so hopefully, we can get her out of here without anyone seeing her.”

Mr R looks thoughtful and shares a look with Alaric, “There is probably a way that we can spin it so that she’s a consultant or something, possibly associated with Jynx, so I wouldn’t worry too much about her being seen.”

“Great,” I reply, and once it seems like that’s all that he’s got to say, Jynx and I turn around and rush back inside. The shock of what has just happened, seeing my mother in person for the first time in years and then watching her die in front of me, has surprisingly moved to the back of my mind, and I feel a bit more like myself. I’m sure it’s all going to come crashing over me later, but for now, I’m going to take this reprieve gratefully so that I can help my men and my family.

“Mr R all caught up?” Trick asks as soon as we walk in.

“Yeah, and I’ve got Alaric in my ear,” I reply. I look toward Rylie and add, “Mr R said that he should be able to spin a story that you’re a consultant or something to do with Jynx and her team so not to worry too much about being seen.”

Rylie nods, “That’s a relief and certainly makes the situation easier.”

I nod in agreement and then ask, “How’s it going in here?”

Ace glances up at me, “Well, the good news is it’s not on a timer this time. The bad news is that it’s fucking complicated, more complicated than I think I’ve ever seen.”

“So you can’t diffuse it?” Rome asks him, sounding somewhat shocked, and I can’t blame him. Ace has a reputation for being able to deal with anything bomb-wise, and he loves it too.

Ace scoffs, his eyes still on the bomb, “I didn’t say that. It’s just going to be slightly more challenging than it usually is.”

“So, you need us to be quiet?” Jynx smirks, knowing him well enough to know that those are probably the next words to come out of his mouth.

There's an air of lightness that instantly dissipates as he opens up a panel and then says, "No, I need you all to leave."

"What?" Atlas barks, sensing the complete change in Ace's attitude and demeanor.

Ace tilts his head slightly, his hands still working and looking over the parts of the bomb strapped to the victim, and he replies, "It turns out I was wrong, and there is a timer, so whereas I thought I had a decent amount of time to figure out how it works and then diffuse it, I don't, I only have seven minutes now and I don't want to risk it going off with all of you guys in here so I need you to leave."

"No fucking way," Jynx exclaims vehemently.

When all of us stay exactly where we are, Ace smirks, "I'm going to rip you all a fucking new one for sticking around later, but right now, I need to focus on this."

"Let us know if you need anything," Trick says, his voice tight with tension.

"I will," Ace replies.

"Can't you just take the vest off?" Rage asks. "I mean, I know that still means everything goes bang, but the organisation has cleared all the buildings, we'd have enough time to get out of the blast zone, and we can still take the victim with us, which means the only evidence that we are losing is the bomb itself."

It's a good idea, and I feel some hope rise in me, but it quickly dies as we all watch Ace shaking his head.

"It's a good idea, but it won't work in this situation because it's all linked, so if I take the jacket off, it's going to trigger the bomb. The only hope of getting the victim and the bomb out is by disabling it."

"Well shit," Jensen says what we're all thinking.

Feeling eyes on me, I move my gaze away from Ace and find Trick watching me closely; I know he wants me to leave just like he knows that I want him to leave.

We both know that neither of us is going to go anywhere though. This is family. I think it shows how well Mr R and Alaric know us that they didn't even try arguing with us about staying. At the end of the day, we'd be in here even if we got a direct order, and there's fuck all they could do about it.

Speaking of Alaric, actually, I reach up and switch my earpiece on so that I can talk to him.

“Now, come on, man, we’re all friends here,” Alaric teases, amusement in his voice.

“I hate to interrupt you doing exactly what Mr R told you not to do, but we have a tiny issue,” I say, and the guys surrounding me chuckle, having guessed what Alaric is doing.

“Shit, I forgot you were in my ear,” he replies, and I can hear the sounds of him walking away from the officer he was speaking to, who is yelling something unintelligible after him. “What’s going on?”

“The bomb is more complicated than we thought, and we’ve just discovered a timer. We have six minutes left,” I explain quickly, “Ace is still working on it, and if anyone can diffuse it, he can.”

Alaric inhales sharply, “I want you out of there now. All of you.”

“If we leave now, we’re going to lose any evidence that could potentially find Hunt or a lead,” I reply, and I’m aware that I have everyone but Ace’s eyes on me. They’re all nodding though, so I know they agree with me.

“Ever,” Alaric starts to say.

Ace interrupts and Alaric can obviously hear him because he stops whatever he is going to say.

“If it gets to one minute thirty, then we’re all getting the fuck out of here. That’s as close as we can get without risking not getting out of the blast zone in time, and I am not having any arguments.” Ace orders, showing a different side to himself.

“Deal,” I reply, while everyone else nods in agreement, “Alaric, did you hear that?”

Alaric sighs heavily, “Yes, I did. I’m not happy about it, but if that’s what you guys want to do, then fine. I will inform Mr R what is going on, and he’s not going to be happy either.”

“Thanks, Alaric. I will keep you updated on what is happening,” I reply.

“You better Ever,” Alaric orders, worry in his tone before the earpiece goes silent again, and I know that he’s muted his side. I do the same.

“How long have we got left?” Rylie asks, not needing to stay out of the limelight since there are no other agents in here.

“Four minutes.” Ace replies tersely, “Mason, get over here and hold this for me. I think I’ve figured it out.”

“Sure thing,” Mason replies without absolutely no hesitation and complete trust in Ace.

Not many people would get even closer to the bomb that could go off at

any minute.

We all listen in tense silence as Ace hands Mason a pair of small sharp pliers that are used to cut through wires and then starts to explain what he needs him to do. It's evident that Ace has given him some sort of training at some point because Mason is following along with what he's saying far better than I am. To me, it just sounds confusing and technical.

I do manage to grasp that they need to cut the wires at the same time, and the reason why Ace needs Mason is because he needs to cut two, and then Mason needs to cut the other one.

"Are you sure, man?" Luc asks, an understandable nervousness lacing his voice.

"I am reasonably sure, but I would still recommend that you guys all get out now," Ace replies. No one moves.

"Trick, you need to leave because if we need to run, you aren't going to be able to keep up, and that's going to put you and the ones who stay back to help you at more risk," Rome says firmly, and he's probably the only one here who could say that to Trick and get him to listen.

Trick clenches his jaw, clearly hating the idea, "Fine, but I'm not going far. I'm just getting a head start. Don't fucking die."

"Yes, boss," we all reply together, even Jynx and her men.

"I'll come with you," Cash says, and he really doesn't have to. He can run fine, but he knows that Trick is going to need the support, and that's just the kind of person that he is.

"Thanks, man," Trick replies, and I watch as they make their way out of the restaurant as quickly as possible.

"Two minutes," Ace says, "if we're going to do this, then we're going to do it now. If you want to leave, I suggest you go."

"We're staying," Jynx replies for all of us, and I'm surprised that Rylie doesn't move a muscle. I mean, she doesn't really know any of us anymore and could've easily just left at the first sign everything was going to go to shit, she hasn't though, and I respect her for that.

She may want to work alone, but I think if she actually gave a team a chance, she'd find that she was pretty good at being in one. That discussion is for another day though; just before we may get blown up is probably not a good time to say anything.

With that thought in my mind, I make my way over to my men, and they surround me, hands on me wherever they can reach. If we're going out, then

we're doing it together. Jynx is doing the same and has Rylie standing there with her as well. I reach my hand out to Pete, who has remained pretty much silent this whole time, and he steps closer, holding it tightly, a slight shake betraying his nerves even though his expression is as fearless as the rest of us.

“On the count of three, and to clarify, I mean when I say three,” Ace orders Mason.

“Understood.”

Chapter Two

“One, two,” Ace says, and we all tense, “three.”

I admit I close my eyes, preparing to feel the heat of the blast like I did at Hunt’s place, although a lot more intensely since we’re so much closer.

“Hell fucking yeah!” Ace suddenly yells, making Pete and I both jump out of our skins, and I know we’re not the only ones when several others start grumbling and calling him a dick.

“I take it from your exclamation that it’s not going to explode then?” Rome asks somewhat drily as he folds his arms over his chest and gives Ace a look.

Ace grins as he stands up, “It’s not going to explode. Well, it might if someone knocks it too hard, but it’s safe enough for the bomb unit to come in and take the vest off her, and then the EMTs can take the body.”

“Great, let’s go and let everyone know that the situation is under control,” Atlas suggests, and we all walk pretty fucking quickly in order to get out of there, even though it is safe now.

I press the button on my earpiece and say, “It’s stable. You can send the bomb team in now to get it off the victim.”

“Thank fuck,” Alaric replies, “I swear to god, you lot are the cause of all of my grey hairs.”

I chuckle, “But you still love us.”

“That’s the problem. You wouldn’t be giving me grey hairs if I didn’t.” He retorts.

“Aww, that’s sweet,” I tease and then laugh as he starts grumbling and then goes mute, as I mute mine as well.

Trick and Cash were only just outside of the restaurant windows, not really far enough away that it would have made much difference, but I understand that they couldn’t have forced themselves any further away; I know I wouldn’t have been able to force myself any further away.

“Status report,” Mr R orders as soon as we’re in earshot, “you’re walking, so I’m assuming that we’re not about to explode.”

“Nope, I did my thing,” Ace says proudly, making Mr R chuckle.

“Alaric is sending in the bomb team to get the vest off of the victim,” I explain.

“Great, good work. I will be discussing the dangers of all staying put with you later,” Mr R replies sternly.

We all know that he most likely won't though; it would be a pointless conversation, especially since we will do exactly the same thing if we ever find ourselves in that position again, and he knows that.

Ace becomes serious as he adds, “If it's okay, I would like to have a look over the bomb. I may be able to get a better idea of who made it, bomb makers always leave a signature, and if I can find it, then I may recognise it or know someone who will.”

Mr R smiles. “Yes, of course. I was actually going to see if you could take a look, so that works well. I'm assuming that you don't want to take a look at it in our bombproof room, in a specialised suit made to protect you at headquarters?”

Ace shakes his head, “No offense, but those sorts of places make me twitchy. I've spent far too much time trying to stay out of them to walk my ass into one willingly.” He then adds with a smirk, “I will take one of those suits though.”

I burst out laughing along with several of the others; I mean, he's not wrong. It would seem like a ridiculous thing to do considering the work that they usually do; even though they've got an ironclad agreement in place with Mr R and the threat of D, I'd probably still feel the same as Ace.

“Fair enough. I'll see what I can do about loaning out a suit,” Mr R replies, “I know your reputation when it comes to explosives, but I still need to ask: is it safe to transport, and do you have somewhere safe where you can study it?”

“Yeah, it's safe enough to travel, and I have somewhere safe-ish. It will work.” Ace replies.

Mr R gives him a skeptical look and opens his mouth in order to say something but gets interrupted by Peter, “Sir, I think it may be a wise idea to check the victim for a similar bug as Gauld had when he was killed.”

“Do you think that's possible?” Rage asks.

“Definitely,” Peter replies thoughtfully, “I think that it's very possible that she was bugged.”

“Okay, I'll let the M.E know,” Mr R replies.

“Did you find out where the shot that took the victim out came from?”

Trick asks.

I really appreciate that they are all referring to her as a victim like we usually would. It's helping me to keep things separate in my mind and get on with doing my job.

“Yeah, actually, it's become a theory that whoever took the shot was interrupted because they didn't appear to pick up after themselves, and there's still a shell casing on the floor and evidence left behind. I knew that you guys would want to look at it, so it hasn't been touched and is being guarded,” Mr R explains and then looks behind us back to the restaurant, prompting us to do the same.

I watch as the bomb team comes out carrying the bomb vest carefully and talks to the EMTs before allowing them to enter. They're about to bring the victim out.

Mr R clears his throat, gaining my attention again as he says, “Why don't you guys go and check out where the kill shot was taken from? I'll get the vest secured in one of the transport boxes and ready to be taken.”

“Good idea,” Trick replies, “Let's go.”

I know what he's doing. He doesn't want me to watch my mother being brought out on a stretcher, and I have to admit that when I can't bear to turn around and look, it probably was the right decision to make if I want to try and remain focused on the job and not get emotional.

Not that I'm sure that I am going to get emotional, and that's part of the problem. I don't think I'm reacting the way I should be. I mean, anyone else would be inconsolable and traumatized by what they've just been through, and yet, I can still work.

We make the trek as a team to a street over, where we find some of our people guarding the entrance to a building. I begin to wonder if they're going to be assholes about letting us in despite the fact it's evident that Mr R sent us. That's how they used to treat us, which is why we always tried to be gone by this point unless we had no choice.

Thankfully, they just nod respectfully, and we even get a smile as they let us through.

Trick pauses and looks at one of them as he asks, “Has anyone moved anything?”

The agent shakes his head, “No, we saw enough to realise that it's where the shot came from. I mean, there's a hole in the window, and we noticed a casing on the floor. Mr R gave us orders not to touch anything though, so we

identified it was the right area and then left everything alone. We haven't gone through it or checked anything."

One of the other agents standing guard clears their throat and says, "We figured that you probably wouldn't have any of the usual crime scene equipment with you, so we've left the equipment box up there with gloves and evidence bags and all that sort of thing."

"Brilliant," Trick replies with a smile, "thanks man."

"No problem," he replies.

We carry on moving through the doors and toward the elevator, and once the doors close behind us, we all share a surprised look. That's not their usual reaction to us being around.

"Huh, that was thoughtful of them. I guess saving their asses has made them a bit more amicable toward us," Riot mutters, with a knowing smirk and echoing my thoughts.

"They'll probably go back to being dicks at some point," Jensen shrugs as we head up in the elevator.

Mr R told us exactly where we needed to go, and this would honestly be the perfect place to sneak around in because it's under construction, there's no one here, I don't think the surveillance is up and running, but of course, we will check that, it's an excellent place to take a shot from and not get caught or interrupted.

"I'll check the cameras in the building and any surveillance cameras from around the perimeter to see if we can get a look at the shooter," Peter says.

"Good idea," Rafe replies as we step out of the elevator and onto a floor with no walls, no carpets, tools everywhere, plastic sheeting hanging to protect various aspects, and it is vast, so big in fact that it echoes with our footsteps as we move through the space to where Mr R told us that the area was.

"Oh yeah, the shot was definitely taken from here," Atlas mutters as he carefully moves through the space and looks at it with the critical eye of a sniper.

Jynx does the same since she is the one who first taught Atlas how to shoot, and she adds her own observations, "The shooter was either really short or he was sitting on a chair, I'm assuming sitting on a chair."

I smirk at that because although she knows what she's talking about, her way of thinking about things is always just slightly twisted and nothing like a normal person would think.

“They had some pretty high-grade equipment,” Jensen adds as he inspects the hole that’s been cut in the glass. “This glass is pretty thick, so it would take something more specialised than what you could just pick up.”

“He’s right,” Rip adds, “and it’s only big enough to fit the end of the sniper rifle through and manipulate it enough to get a straight shot.”

“Speaking of the shot,” Atlas adds, “It’s a pretty damn impressive shot that they made, so we aren’t dealing with a middle of the road sniper.”

“That’s not really surprising though,” Rylie says, as she looks over the area with a critical eye, “Hunt doesn’t employ people who are mediocre. He only wants the best and will accept nothing less.”

“Yeah, that’s a really good point,” Rage replies.

“Alright, everyone, spread out and see what you can find,” Trick orders.

I move over to the box that the other team left for us and pull out some gloves, evidence bags, and some tweezers because I have learned over the last few years that they are surprisingly useful and at nearly every crime scene that we go over I have needed them at some point.

We all split up, and Luc picks up the shell casing off the floor and puts it in an evidence bag. It looked like it was just left where it dropped, and as Rylie pointed out, Hunt only employs the best, so I think it’s safe to assume that he got interrupted, not expecting us to respond so quickly and Mr R’s agents be so thorough at what they do.

Unfortunately, there’s not much more evidence, at least not that I can see, although the forensic team will come in after us with all of their technical equipment and properly scour the entire area.

“What’s that noise?” Rafe suddenly asks, and we all fall silent, listening.

Sure enough, I can hear some kind of music playing, and Ace disappears through the plastic sheeting, coming back with a laptop in his hands.

“You guys aren’t going to believe this,” he mutters, and before any of us can ask him to clarify, he turns the screen around.

“Seriously?” I exclaim.

“The looney tunes again?” Riot exclaims, disbelief running through his tone.

“It’s like he’s decided that it’s his calling card or something,” Rage mutters.

Mal frowns, “Was someone here to press play?”

Mason continues his twins' thought process, “He’s right. It definitely wasn’t playing when we walked in; we were silent, and I’m sure that the

agents downstairs would've mentioned something as weird as hearing the Looney Tunes up here."

"Don't worry, it was on a timer," Ace says, looking over the laptop. He then adds, "From what I can tell, it's completely blank. There's nothing on it at all, not even the programs that usually come with a laptop."

"So, like the other one, then?" Cash asks.

"Yeah, exactly, apart from there's no file either. It's just the Looney Tunes file." Ace explains.

"Alright, well, you've got your hands full with the bomb, so if you give it to Pete, he can have a look over it and double-check that it is as empty as it appears." Trick suggests, and Ace smiles as he hands it over to Pete.

Pete immediately takes a seat and starts typing away before he realises that the rest of us are just staring at him.

He smirks as he explains, "I'm just doing a quick look through it to see if it's got any tracking software on it. I don't want to take it back with us if there's even a tiny chance that Hunt could be able to trace it. I'd do what I usually do and copy the hard drive so it couldn't be traced because we don't have the laptop, just the information off it, but I didn't expect to need one for dinner, and I was so excited to finally meet Rylie that I forgot to bring a damn USB with me."

"Ah, well, it's a good job that I picked up some tricks from you," Ace smiles before anyone says anything, and he pulls out a USB from his pocket and gives it to Pete, who smiles with relief.

"Thank fuck, it's so much more secure to do it that way," Pete replies, sticking the USB in and pressing a few buttons. "It shouldn't take too long."

"Great," Trick replies and then looks around at everyone. A couple of us have evidence bags, but not many of us. "It seems like even though the shooter was interrupted and left more evidence behind than they clearly would've liked, they still worked really fucking cleanly."

"Oh yeah, there's no doubt about that," Atlas replies, "there's barely any evidence left behind."

"All done," Pete says, standing up. He puts the laptop back down and then adds, "We can get going now."

"Great, let's get this evidence back to Mr R and tell him that he can send the forensic team in." Trick says.

It's getting late now, and because I'm starting to get tired, I can feel the events of the last couple of hours catching up to me, but I vehemently push it

back because I desperately do not want to feel whatever it is on the periphery of my consciousness until I am at home and in my safe space.

Getting back to Mr R doesn't take us very long at all, and we find him pretty much where we left him, still ordering people around. He has a box at his feet, and I'm assuming that's got the vest that the victim was wearing in it and ready for Ace to take back and look over.

"Do we need to worry about there being a tracker on that bomb?" I ask as the thought occurs to me.

"No, he thought it was going to explode. It would have been pointless to put a tracker on it. Not only that, but I looked over it pretty fucking thoroughly when I was trying to work out how to diffuse it, and I didn't see anything that would point toward a tracker," Ace reassures me.

"Thank fuck for that," I mutter.

"Did you find anything?" Mr R asks as soon as we approach.

We all hand over what we've found and tell him what we've observed.

"There wasn't much. We let you know when we find anything, if we find anything," Trick tells him.

Mr R nods, "Great, I will keep you informed about what we've going on here as well. I would be surprised if he doesn't lay low for a while now. So with that in mind, and if you're agreeable, I will still send jobs your way if we have them."

Trick glances at us, and when we make no protests, he nods, "Yeah, that works for us. Obviously, at a slower pace than usual so that we have enough time to deal with any leads that we get with the Hunt case."

Mr R nods, "Yes, of course. I'll give you first refusal, and you can decide what one you want to do and which ones you want to pass on."

"That would be great. Thank you, sir," Atty replies for us all.

Mr R smiles and then looks down at the box by his feet and back to Ace, "This is for you. The box should contain a blast better than the standard ones, something else courtesy of the tech team."

"Great, thank you," Ace replies, hauling the box up into his arms.

Mr R turns his attention to Rylie, who is blending in with the group of us so well that I honestly would suspect anything, "I am assuming that you are now on this case full-time?"

"You assume right. I have a few places I can check to see if he's been seen. I can also follow a couple of leads that may or may not lead us anywhere." Rylie replies with a smile.

Before Mr R can reply, Trick does, “I understand that you are used to working alone, and that’s how you like, and I respect that. I will also not ask you to take one of our team members with you. However, I will ask that you approach these places as recon only, and if you do find anything of note, you call me, and I will send in backup. He’s already taken you once, and we will not risk it happening again.”

Trick’s focus is entirely on Rylie, watching her expressions and how she reacts to his words, so he completely misses the absolute pride that shines from Mr R as he smiles and watches them both. Like the rest of us, he is probably wondering how Rylie is going to take the order from Trick.

Chapter Three

“Okay,” Rylie agrees with a smile.

Mr R stares at her incredulously, “Seriously? Okay? You’re not going to give him any shit at all for ordering you around?”

The way he says it makes me think that Rylie has given him plenty of shit before, and I’m guessing it was mainly at the beginning of her time working for the organisation.

Rylie grins and then shrugs, “It’s Trick. I know that he’s a good leader and that he has my best interests at heart. I also agree with him, and I’m not the only one that’s invested in this case. I think you could argue that Ever has an even bigger stake in getting him taken down now. I had no idea when I first met you whether you actually had my best interest at heart and were capable of being a leader.”

I burst out laughing. I can’t help it, it’s such a Rylie way to look at it, and I love that she gave him shit when she first joined, despite the fact that he is the leader of a somewhat secret part of the government and was obviously very capable of leading.

“You know, I would be surprised, but knowing you for as long as I have now, I can see the logic you used.” Mr R concedes, making me smile.

Rylie shrugs again, and it’s clear that she has respect for him now, and I can almost guarantee that she rarely chooses to test his leadership now. I mean, after all, he has her life in his hands, and he’s kept her safe for this long. That automatically earns him some respect.

Looking at Trick, Rylie adds, “I will let you know of my whereabouts and if I find anything that I think we should investigate. How often would you like me to check in?”

Trick smiles, “Thank you. I know this may seem a bit much to you, but you’ve just been kidnapped by him, and we’d like to know sooner rather than later if it’s happened again, so I would prefer check-ins twice a week.”

“Got it. I can do that,” Rylie replies, and Mr R actually rolls his eyes this time; I’m guessing she fought him on that too.

“Great, thank you,” Trick replies.

“I guess I should get going then,” Rylie smiles, “I’ve got a lot to organise, and you guys have a lot to sort out as well.”

She goes around and hugs us all, saving me for last, and when she pulls me in, she whispers in my ear, “If you need to talk about what happened today, message me, and I will call you when I can. I know we haven’t been close for years, but I’m hoping we can get back there, and maybe I could be one of your besties again. I know I want to meet Lyric; Quinn spoke about her often.”

Stepping back, I smile, “You never stopped being one of my besties. We’ll get back to knowing each other well again; it’s just going to take a little bit of time to catch up. It has been years.”

“Tell me about it,” she replies and then says goodbye one last time before she disappears into the crowd, melting into it until I couldn’t find her if I wanted to.

“It’s fucking impressive the way that she can do that,” Pete says. “I like her, by the way, she’s fucking awesome.”

“She is,” Jynx agrees, “alright, I’m shattered. Let’s get home.”

“Good idea,” Trick replies.

We say goodbye to Mr R and then walk back to the cars. There are still barriers in place and agents everywhere, and they’re going to be here for a while, combing the area and dealing with the local law enforcement.

When we get to the cars, Jynx asks, “What are we doing now?”

“Go home, Pete; if you can go through the surveillance and laptop USB to see if you can find anything, that would be great. Ace, I know you want to get started on the bomb, but I would rather that you wait and see if Mr R gets you a suit,” Trick replies.

Ace glances around at all of his family, who are nodding enthusiastically and smiles, “Yeah, I can do that. Do you want me to help Pete in the meantime?”

“Yes, please,” Pete replies before anyone else can.

“Great, you guys work on that and let us know if you find anything, although I assume that’s going to be unlikely,” Trick replies.

Pete starts to say something but stops when Alaric jogs up to us from the other side of the building.

“I’m glad I caught you before you went home,” Alaric says, and then looks over us all, “I think considering that Hunt is going to be difficult and most

likely going to lay low for a while, the best thing for us to do to get this moving forward is to find Liam.”

All of our attention goes to Atlas to see how he feels about the suggestion. I have to admit that it was something that crossed my mind, as I’m sure it did the others too. Judging from the lack of surprise on Atlas’s face, it’s something that has occurred to him too.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Atty replies. “We need to know what he does and how Amelia ended up with Hunt. I mean, there is a chance that Liam is with Hunt as well.”

“All very good points. He’s laid low for a long time; we haven’t heard or seen him since he called out Ever as Shadow and said that he was going into hiding with Amelia to avoid Blake.” Alaric says, crossing his arms over his chest and frowning. “In all honesty, we’ve looked, it may have turned out that Blake was the one in control of the more heinous criminal dealings and that Liam had lost complete control of him, but Liam has a lot of blood on his hands, and we still wanted to bring him in. when even the vast reach of the organisation couldn’t find them we thought that Blake had gotten them.”

“To be honest, I think we all did,” Rage replies, and the majority of us nod in agreement.

I hadn’t really given it much thought. Liam was quiet, wasn’t causing any shit, and we knew that Alaric and the organisation were dealing with it, and if they needed our help or had any information, then they would’ve shared it with us.

“Okay, so that’s what we focus on,” Trick says, getting us back into work mode, much like he did for me inside the restaurant. “We need to find Liam, bring him in, and see what he knows.”

Atlas nods, “I agree, it’s the next logical step.”

“Me too,” Alaric says.

As hard as it is for Atlas, it's got to be hard for Alaric too. Liam is his adoptive brother; he knew Liam before all of this, and I imagine that he wasn’t always who he is now. I mean, even the Liam that I know is different from the Liam that Atlas and Alaric know, and it’s just one great big cluster fuck of confusion, and I’m guessing that’s another reason why we all chose to let other people take over the case.

“I can put some feelers out and see if anyone on my side of the line knows anything. D might, and if not I know some people who used to run in the same circles as Liam and they might know something,” Jynx offers.

“That would be great, actually. I can’t officially contact D in any capacity about a case, but you can,” Alaric replies. He then adds, “I’ll do what I can from my end as well to try and locate him.”

“Great, we’ll do weekly check-ins unless anyone finds something,” Trick suggests. It doesn’t take long for everyone to agree, and then we’re saying our goodbyes again.

“I’ll come with you guys,” Pete says, looking at Mason and the guys, “if that’s okay, and then you guys can drop me off?”

“Yeah, of course, man,” Rome answers.

“Thanks,” Pete replies as he pulls me into a tight hug, “I’m just a phone call away. I will be up at your place in minutes if you need me.”

“Thank you,” I reply, “I promise I will call if I need you.”

He pulls back and looks over me critically. I don’t know what he sees, but he nods slightly and then turns around and gets in the car.

The rest of Jynx’s men all start to get in the car as well as my guys do the same but before I can get in the car to head home, Jynx comes over and pulls me into the tightest hug ever.

“It’s okay not to feel what you think you should be feeling,” she says quietly, and emotion starts to knot in my throat. She steps back but keeps hold of my hands as she adds, “I’ve been there. I know how difficult it is when an absent or abusive parent dies. How you are feeling right now is okay my gorgeous best friend, and when you are ready to talk it out, if you ever are, I will be here for you. You got that?”

My eyes are slightly watery; she understands, and she gets it, and I feel validated and less confused about what I’m feeling because it’s okay to feel how I’m feeling.

I smile, “I’ve got it. I think I need a while, but you will be the person who I talk to about it when I’m ready.”

“Good,” Jynx replies. “Now, go get some rest. We’ve got another blast from both of our pasts heading our way soon and Liam isn’t someone that you want to drop your guard around.”

“You know, I sometimes forget that you knew Liam because you knew Atlas and Rage before,” I reply with a frown.

“And D had dealings with him before Blake went full psycho, and all that shit happened. I mean, to be honest, I’m entirely unsure what was Liam and what was Blake, I think it probably blurred.” Jynx replies with a frown.

“Well, we can ask him soon. Depending on whether he’s in a talking

mood,” I reply. Talking about something work-related has pushed my emotions down, and judging from the wink that Jynx just gave me, she knows that and did it on purpose.

“Go home, snuggle with your men. Feel what you’re feeling and then stand tall and let’s get this fucker,” Jynx tells me fiercely.

“I will,” I tell her and then turn around and open the door to get into the car. Jensen steps out so I can slide into the middle between Atlas and him.

Everyone is silent in the car; we’re all lost in our own worlds, and I spend most of the journey with my head on Atty’s chest, his arm wrapped around me, and my fingers threaded with Jensen’s, who is sitting on the other side of me.

Walking through the door, I instantly feel safe, like I always have when I’ve come through that door. The Christmas decorations that we haven’t taken down yet make me smile. I love Christmas, although a hell of a lot of eventful things have surrounded this one.

“Do you want to talk yet?” Rage asks me gently.

I shake my head, “Not really. I’m okay, and I think that’s what I need to deal with. She was my mother, and she was shot in front of me, and yet I’m okay.”

“There’s no wrong way to feel about this,” Riot adds thoughtfully.

“I know, but it’s still going to take me a moment to be okay with the fact that I’m okay,” I try to explain and then add, “I hope that makes sense.”

“We get it,” Trick replies for all of them.

“What about you?” I ask Atty, knowing that I’m not the only one who was dealt a shock tonight, and I don’t want him to get overlooked. “Are you okay?”

Atty pulls me close, smiling down at me while we all wait for Atlas to answer, the others looking just as concerned as I am.

“I’m okay. Liam was a bastard, but he can’t do shit to me now, and more than that, Blake was the cause of most of my trauma. I’m just viewing him as a lead that we need to follow and that’s it.” Atlas explains.

I study him closely, wanting to make sure that he’s not just putting on a brave face or something like that and sure enough, his posture is relaxed, and his facial expression is open. He really is okay with it.

“Good,” Rage replies, looking at his friend and then adding, “If that changes though, you let us know immediately. Family first.”

“Family first,” Atty repeats with a smile.

Out of everyone, Rage knows what Atlas's relationship was like with his father better than anyone, he was there after all and was an eyewitness.

"I know," Jensen suddenly exclaims when the room falls silent, "why don't we get our PJs on, get loads of snacks and blankets, and then we can curl up on the couches with our girlfriend and watch some movies?"

"You mean like a sleepover?" Luc smirks.

Jensen points at him, "Exactly, my friend, exactly."

"I'm in," Rafe grins. "I've got loads of snacks, and hot chocolate won't take me very long."

"I am definitely in," Trick replies with a smile.

"I'm always up for snuggles and movies," Atlas grins.

They all turn to look at me, as if my reply is in question "I will never turn down a movie night sleepover with my men."

"It's settled. everyone go and get something comfy on, and we'll grab snacks and meet in the front room." Trick says.

Everyone is clearly excited for the idea, and we actually haven't done it for a while, so I'm really looking forward to it. Everyone splits up on the top landing to get their stuff and blankets, and I decide to have a quick shower to wash the evening away before I head back downstairs with everyone. We've had so many people here over the last couple of weeks that it will be really nice for it just to be us.

I quickly check my phone to see if Lyric has messaged or called, but it's only been two days since we found Quinn and brought him home, so I'm not surprised to see that there are no messages from her or any of the others.

Rafe

It was really nice to watch movies with everyone and for it to be just us. I adore my extended family, and they will always be welcome in our house, but it has been a lot recently, and it's not going to be the same for a while. I have no idea when Jynx is planning on going home, and I imagine that when Lyric and the guys re-emerge, they're going to be around more too.

Like I said, that's not a problem at all, but it does mean that we need to find time to be together as us so that we don't start to feel strung out.

Fortunately, I'm not the only one who thinks like this, and we are all conscious of the fact that we need time to ourselves too. As soon as Ever settled down in the middle of our large U-shaped couch, the rest of us converged around her, some of us choosing to sit on the floor in front of her so that we were closer to her. Of course, we did have to share her with Runa. As soon as she realised that we didn't have any guests around, she jumped on Ever for snuggles and then eventually went around to each of us for extra cuddles as soon as Ever drifted off to sleep, which didn't take very long at all.

I'm worried about her of course, but I trust that she will talk to us when she is ready, and I think she's more struggling with the fact that she is okay with it than anything else. But I think the thing is that as far as Ever is concerned that woman is a stranger, and after we found out that she abandoned Ever with her father, knowing he was abusive and that Liam had actually wanted to take Ever with them, I get why she wouldn't have very strong feelings for her.

In fact, if I were her, I would feel some resentment toward her, and quite honestly that might be another reason why Ever is struggling because she doesn't think that she is allowed to be angry with her mother now that she is dead.

Thankfully, Jynx has been in a similar situation and that means that she was able to talk to Ever and hopefully put her mind at ease.

It's a fucked up situation.

I don't think I will ever be able to wrap my head around the fact that Liam was the one that showed more passion and caring toward Ever than her own mother did, even after he rescued her mother. But that's another question mark that has been bothering me: the way that he behaved with Ever is a direct contradiction to how we know that he treated Atlas. Even when he called when we were at Pete's father's house and he told us about Blake and that he was going into hiding, he was concerned about Ever and her safety, but despite Liam's words toward Atlas, I also picked up on concern for him, and that's confusing in itself.

I spent a lot of time listening to people and studying them and their expressions and tone of voice when I didn't speak, and I learned a lot about how to tell someone's true feelings. I waited but none of the other guys mentioned anything so I figured I either got it wrong or they didn't pick up on it. When everything kicked off, and we assumed that he was dead, I

thought that it was pretty damn pointless to bring it up, considering we may never get the answers, and it could cause more harm than good.

Now, though it's something that I want to observe if we do manage to find him and he decides to cooperate.

Chapter Four

Rafe

It's going to be interesting, that's for sure. The sun has just started to peak over the horizon, and when I glance out of the window, still surrounded by all of my sleeping family members, I'm surprised to see that it's snowing pretty heavily. I thought that we'd come to the end of the heavy snowfall for this season, but clearly, I was wrong. It might be a blessing in disguise though, because it means we can't go anywhere, and no one can get up here as well.

Considering that Ever is missing from the pile on the couch, I'm guessing that she could do with an extra day of family time. I decide to get up and go and find her, just to make sure that she's okay and also to get a start on breakfast and maybe some rolls for lunch, oh, and a stew. This weather calls for hearty food.

I slowly extract myself from Riot and smile when he doesn't even stir and simply settles back down and starts snoring again. I'm not going to be able to focus on getting all the food that I want to make prepped until I know that Ever is okay. I know my girl well enough to know that when she's feeling things that she doesn't know how to deal with, she tends to end up fighting it out, and that means that she's down in the gym.

As I make my way there, Runa appears and darts around my feet before she trots in front of me as if to say she's down here. I'll take you to her. I chuckle quietly as I watch her pounce on something that I can't see. My smile falls slightly as I get to the gym door and look inside to see Ever beating the shit out of one of the punching bags with her headphones in. Her music must be up pretty loud because she doesn't hear me, and I wasn't trying to be quiet. She doesn't look like she's been up for too long though, and I know that she needs this to help her work through what she's feeling, so now that I've seen that she's okay, I turn back around and start to head back to the kitchen to do my own version of distracting while I wait for her to be okay.

A tiny meow catches my attention though, and I turn back to see Runa

waiting by the entryway to the gym. Smiling, I say to her, “Go and make sure she’s okay.”

She meows once and then strides into the gym with purpose, making me chuckle. At least Ever isn’t going to be completely alone.

I quickly lose myself in getting breakfast ready for everyone and preparing some dinner for later. The sooner I can get the stew on, the better it’s going to taste. Of course, as soon as the aromas of breakfast and all the other things that I’m making start to waft through the front room, the guys start appearing, and I chuckle as all of them head straight for the coffee, the rush to get their first morning cup is the reason why we have two in two different areas of the kitchen.

“Are you okay? You’ve cooked a lot already,” Riot asks me quietly as he sips his coffee and watches me closely as everyone else makes their way into the extension to sit at the table or on the couches, slowly waking up.

“I’m okay. I’m just worrying about Ever. She’s down in the gym beating the shit out of a punching bag,” I explain.

His eyes darken with worry, but he replies, “Hopefully, that’s what she needs to do to get her thoughts in order, and then she’ll be okay. If she’s not, then we’re here, and it doesn’t look like we’re going anywhere, not in this weather.”

“No, we’re stuck here for the day,” I reply, glancing out of the window again at the falling snow.

“How far into her workout was she?” Rage asks, coming to stand next to us and leaning on the counter.

“She didn’t look like she’d been up that long and wasn’t breathing particularly hard, so I would say that she’s only just started,” I reply thoughtfully.

“Okay, we’ll give her an hour then. If she’s still down there, we’ll send someone down to talk to her and get her to take it easy.” Rage suggests.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. I recommend Jensen, actually, he’s surprisingly good in these situations,” I add.

“Unless she’s crying, and then there’s no point in sending him down because he’s just going to end up hurting himself panicking about how to make it better,” Riot points out, which, of course, makes us all chuckle.

He’s so capable in so many situations, and yet Ever crying he absolutely cannot handle in any capacity. Which, of course, nearly always makes Ever smile. I would wonder if he was doing it on purpose to cheer her up since he

knows that it works, but I've watched him, and the panic is real, which makes it even funnier, to be honest.

"What are you three chuckling about?" Ever asks as she walks into the kitchen, freshly showered and looking relaxed. When we all just smile at her in relief, she raises her eyebrow and asks, "Guys?"

Rage seems to recover better than either of us, and he says, "Sorry, Puddin', we were just laughing at the way Jensen reacts when you cry."

I wince. That sounded bad, and I hope she doesn't take it the wrong way or look into it as something more than it is. I should've known better; it's Ever; she doesn't even blink before she chuckles as well.

"Yeah, he really can't handle it even after all of this time," she admits.

"Breakfast is ready. I think the others are already tucking in; you're just in time," I tell her, as she pads over to me on bare feet and stands up on her tiptoes to give me a kiss before going around to the other two and giving them similar greetings.

"Great, I'm freaking starving," she grins as she grabs a massive cup of coffee and heads into the extension, where the guys started loading a plate for her as soon as she came into the kitchen.

Once she's eaten a decent amount, Trick asks the question that we're all wondering the answer to, "How are you feeling about everything?"

Ever smiles slightly as she sips her coffee and really seems to think about her answer, which we all appreciate because there was a time when she would have just automatically answered that she was fine even if she wasn't.

"I'm okay. Jynx told me it was okay not to feel what I thought I should be feeling and that it was okay not to feel sad." She explains, "I knew that to a certain degree. I mean, I didn't know her, and she left me with a man that she knew was dangerous and abusive. I think, honestly, the only feelings I have toward her are the same sorts of feelings that I would feel for any victim," she pauses and then adds, "Actually, that's not true. I'm angry at her for leaving me in the situation she did. Even Liam wanted to take me and save me from him, and I would have been safer with them than I was with my father. I think it's going to take me a while to work through my feelings and anger at her until I can get to a point where I can forgive her for that."

She's incredible. It's impressive how she's dealt with this situation and worked through her feelings already, helped by some pretty damn good advice from Jynx and knowing herself well enough to be able to admit to herself how she feels honestly.

“I would feel the same if I was in the same position,” Jensen admits.

“So would I,” I agree, and then add, “remember that D has people that you can talk to if you need to.”

“I know,” she replies with a smile, “and I promise that I will if I feel like I need to.”

“Good,” I reply.

“Let us know if you start struggling with any aspect of what we find out as we progress with this case,” Luc says, the rest of us nodding in agreement.

Ever

“I will,” I reassure them, and I will. I haven’t lied to them or not told them everything I am feeling. I really am okay, and I really do just feel angry at her.

Even that though, probably isn’t as much as it should be. I am a big believer in not holding onto anger and negativity; there’s been so much in my life that if I held onto it all and held a grudge, then I would be incredibly bitter. Having said that, it is okay for me to feel angry with her for what she did because it was wrong. I just need to not hold onto it and let it fester. I know all this, and I most likely will end up talking to one of D’s therapists. He employs the best, and they are used to dealing with issues involving our alternative lifestyle.

No offense to Mr R, but until recently everyone who worked at headquarters wasn’t exactly friends of ours and weren’t professionals when it came to us either. I wouldn’t feel comfortable talking to them and trusting that it was going to stay confidential as it should. There’s also the issue of the mole; even though we are reasonably confident that we have dealt with the issue in-house and no more information should get leaked, that doesn’t mean we have, and I wouldn’t want any information like that to get out.

“Good,” Trick replies.

I’m just about to ask what we’re doing today since the weather is clearly not going to let anyone up here when Trick’s phone starts to ring, and he answers it, letting us know it’s Pete. When we all just stare at him curiously, he chuckles.

“Hang on, Pete, let me put you on speakerphone. The nosey fuckers are doing what they do best and being nosey.” Trick tells him, and when Peter's voice comes through the phone, he's chuckling. Trick grins at us as he says, “Alright, man, go ahead and repeat what you were saying.”

Pete's amused voice says, “What I was saying is that I've been on the phone with Ace, and we've been making a plan of attack. He's going over the surveillance, and I'm going to start looking into the designers of the bug that was found in Gauld. We need to get something designed quickly so that we can detect them.”

“That makes sense,” Cash agrees, “especially since all of the many security measures at headquarters didn't pick up the presence of it. That's really concerning.”

“Exactly,” Pete replies, “I've had the tech team send a few images of it over to me since I'm not going to be able to get into headquarters to get a proper look myself for a few days. I'll start researching it, and hopefully, we'll have a designer that we can talk to. I've also got a couple of design ideas for the device that we can use to detect them. I want something that all agents have to walk through before they come on to the site, but I also want something that can be handheld and used out in the field just in case.”

“Sometimes I forget just how crazy smart you are,” I tell him honestly.

“Sorry, that got away from me for a minute,” Pete replies with a smile in his voice.

“So, I'm assuming that you want to spend some time at headquarters with the tech team to get to the bottom of this?” Trick asks him.

We all smile at each other, already knowing the answer.

“Yeah, if that's alright?” Pete asks and then continues, “Obviously, if we get any leads on this case or even get given a new case, then I'll step back and leave them to it.”

Trick's smile is broad as he replies, “That sounds good to me. If anyone can design what you just described, then it's you, and unless we really need you, I think that's probably where you're going to be needed the most. I know the tech team has been bugging you, and that's just a guess.”

Pete chuckles, “They have, and if you are sure. I just really think it's a good idea to get a jump start on this and get it done as soon as possible. It presents a giant threat to the organisation.”

“I agree,” Atty replies, “it's definitely a good idea and the best place for you to be.”

“Great,” Pete says. “I’ll let the guys know.”

“Before you go,” Trick stops him just before he hangs up, “did you get a chance to look at the USB?”

“Shit yeah, I did; sorry, I thought I led with that,” he replies, “I guess I was a bit too excited about working on the new device.”

“That’s alright, man, we know you, we don’t mind,” Rafe reassures him.

Pete lets out a breath and then answers Trick’s previous question, “As we all assumed, there was nothing on the USB, not a trigger or a bug, nothing at all that could lead us back to Hunt.”

“Okay, well, at least we can cross that off.” Trick replies. “We’ll let you know if we get any more updates, and keep us updated on where you are with the tech stuff.”

“You got it,” Pete says and then promptly hangs up.

“Oh, he must be really excited to get started on the research,” I chuckle.

“Absolutely, he normally sticks around chats for a while before he goes,” Rage chuckles.

“Well, since we’re on a roll and Pete brought up the bugs anyway, I’m going to call Mr R and see if he’s got an update for us,” Trick suggests, looking around at all of us to see what we think.

“The M.E hasn’t really had enough time to do a thorough examination of the victim. I’d leave it until this afternoon at the earliest if I were you,” Cash suggests, making a really good point.

“Yeah, I hadn’t actually checked the time, but you are right,” Trick replies with a smile.

Atlas’s phone pings with a message, and he says, “I guess Alaric wanted to get an early start on this as well because he’s just messaged saying that there’s no update on Liam yet. Not even a whiff of his presence, which he finds suspicious in itself. He will keep us updated and says to let him know if Jynx has any better luck.”

“We suspected that he’d be difficult to find,” I point out, “he knew that the organisation was looking for him, and he’s not a stupid man, so he wouldn’t want to advertise his whereabouts.”

“All very true, but it does make me wonder what Amelia was doing with Hunt,” Riot asks, “I mean, that’s not lying low at all. Hunt isn’t one to keep quiet. His love of blowing things up can attest to that.”

“More than that though, he would’ve done his research on her and surely known of all of her history, so that brings up a lot of questions as well,” Luc

adds thoughtfully.

“There’s always the possibility that the reason why Liam has done so well and lying low is because he’s dead. Blake could’ve gotten to Liam, and either Blake allowed Amelia her freedom because she hasn’t really had anything to do with the business stuff or, less likely, she escaped.” Jensen suggests.

“I don’t think she would have been able to escape unless Blake allowed her to,” Atlas replies, knowing him better than us all, “but that then brings up another question of why he would let her escape. Blake doesn’t do that; he’s not known for mercy, and he would’ve killed her just for fun. He would’ve made Liam watch or something so that his last moments on earth were even more horrific.”

“We can speculate all we want,” Rafe starts, “but at the end of the day, the only way we’re going to get any helpful information is if we find Liam dead or alive. Whichever way we find him, at least we’ll know something.”

“Well, you’re not wrong. Since we can’t go anywhere today and the case is at a standstill, what are we doing?” I ask.

Trick shrugs, “I think we may have a very rare day off, with absolutely nothing planned, so whatever you want to.”

“Awesome, I’m reading more of that series then. It’s got me hooked.” Jensen grins and gets up, taking his plate to the kitchen.

“I might just veg on the couch with Runa and catch up on some TV. I could do with a day of doing something completely mindless.” I say.

“I’ll join you if you don’t mind?” Cash asks.

I give him a look and reply, “Of course I don’t. I always need cuddle buddies when I watch stuff.”

“In that case, I’m in too,” Rage grins.

“Same. I don’t want to do anything but sit and watch TV. Who the hell knows when we’ll be able to do it again,” Atlas agrees.

“I’m going to do some drawing,” Trick suggests, smiling when I give him a proud look. It’s still a touchy subject, but the main reason why he doesn’t draw as much as he used to now is because of time and not fear as much.

“I’ve got to do the bread for dinner, and I may as well try out a few new recipes that I’ve had going around my head for a while,” Rafe adds.

“You know where I’ll be if you need a taste tester,” I grin.

“Oh, me too,” Jensen adds, “I volunteer as tribute, and I’ll read in the front room so you can find and Ever doesn’t try and steal all the food.”

“Hey, I wouldn’t do that!” I retort, and several snorts of disbelief meet my

proclamation.

“You absolutely would,” Riot teases and then adds, “I need to get a workout in, so I’ll be in the gym if anyone needs me.”

Chapter Five

I'm having the best day, curled up with some of my guys, watching easy to watch Tv, and snacking on all of the yummy things that Rafe is producing in the kitchen. He said he had a couple of recipes that he wanted to try, but he's been in there all day, and he's still coming out with new things for me and Jensen to try.

He won't just accept the standard; yes, it's delicious. We have to tell him what we like about it and what we don't. Give specifics and what we think he could do to improve it. It's quite involved, but at the same time, it's so worth it. It's very rare that he makes something that doesn't taste very good.

We're all chilled out when my phone vibrates, and I pull it out, seeing that it's Jynx calling me. She had already texted me earlier to see if I was okay and told me she pretty much felt the same way when her mom was killed, and she got sent her finger. So, I'm not really sure why she's calling now.

"Hey, are you okay?" I ask.

"Yeah, everything is good. I'm just calling to let you and the others know that we're going to have to head back for a bit, Sawyer has held down the fort pretty damn well, considering we've been away for a while, but I need to go we've had a couple of jobs come through that I need to go over and make sure are given to the right people," Jynx explains.

"Of course, to be honest, I didn't expect you guys to stick around for as long as you have," I reply with a smile.

"It's been nice to see you guys for a bit longer than usual. I was hoping I'd get to check in with Lyric before I go, but I don't think that's going to happen. We are hoping to come back and be involved with the Hunt case once we've got things sorted at home. None of us like leaving a case half finished, and with the threat that he poses to everyone, we want to be involved." She adds.

"That would be great. Any help we can get on this case would be brilliant," I reply.

"Did Mr R send the bomb suit to Ace?" Trick asks.

I shrug and relay the question to Jynx, and she chuckles as she replies, “Yeah, he’s been walking around the house pretending he’s an astronaut for most of the morning.”

“No way,” I grin. “Actually, I can’t say that I’m that surprised.”

“Yeah, we’re going to leave him here so that he can go over the bomb. We all know what he’s like when he’s in the zone, so chances are he won’t even notice that we’ve gone. Plus, he doesn’t want to risk moving the bomb again. It’s unnecessary when he’s quite happy to stay here, and we can do what we need to at home without him,” Jynx adds.

“I’ll make sure to bug him every now and again and get him to eat. I’m sure Jensen will be down to force him out, and we can get him to come up here for dinner and stuff so that he doesn’t get too lost in what he’s doing,” I tell her.

I’m more than aware of how Ace can get when he gets into a project. Peter is exactly the same way, which reminds me that I need to make regular calls to him as well to make sure that he is eating and looking after himself. Although thankfully, Elijah isn’t on a job at the moment, so he’s going to be reminded often that he has to do human things like eat and shower. As soon as the snow has let up a bit, I’ll go down and bring him and Elijah up here for dinner.

“Thank you,” she replies, sounding slightly relieved. I know she gets worried about him when he gets super focused on a project.

“When are you guys headed out?” I ask.

“We’re hoping to go tomorrow, depending on the weather. I know you guys are going to be stuck for a couple of days, but if the snow lets up tonight, then we should be able to get out of town. I’ll let you know when we leave though,” she replies. “Are you still doing okay? I’ll stay if you need me to and send the guys back instead?”

“Thank you, but it’s like I told you earlier, I really am okay with it. I’m just fucking angry with her,” I reply. “I’m actually more concerned about Lyric. We haven’t heard anything, and I know it’s only been a couple of days, but I’m worried.”

“Me too, but if you think about everything that they’ve got to talk about and work through, it is going to take a while. Give it a couple more days, and then just send her a text checking in,” Jynx suggests.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. I know you’re right; I just worry.”

“Me too,” she replies, “alright, I’m going to go. We’ve got a movie

planned. It's weird having proper time off."

"Tell me about it," I reply, "bye."

Once I've hung up, I quickly fill the guys in on what the conversation was about, and then we settle back down, enjoying more snuggles. Eventually, I can't sit still any longer, and I get up to see if Rafe needs any help in the kitchen.

"Hey, Baby," he greets me happily as he feels the temperature of some cupcakes that are sitting on cooling racks, "you're just in time to help me decorate."

"Ooo yum," I reply, and then smirk as I add, "I mean, I can totally help you."

"Yeah, yeah," he chuckles, pulling me in toward his chest and kissing me thoroughly.

We've decorated about half of the cupcakes that he's prepared, and I've eaten the majority of the icing rather than putting it on the cupcakes when Trick comes striding down the stairs.

"Mr R got back to me," he announces, and the guys in the front room pause the TV. Trick notices that there's a couple of us missing, so he adds, "Can someone text the others and get them to come up here quickly? I need everyone here for this update so I don't have to repeat myself."

"Sure," Jensen replies from where he's sitting by the window, reading the third book in the Veil Diaries series. "They'll be here in ten."

While we wait, Rafe and I hand out cupcakes, and we all take seats again in the front room so that we can hear what Trick has to say better. Thankfully, it takes them less than ten minutes to appear because I'm feeling just a tiny bit impatient.

So impatient, in fact, that as soon as they've sat down, I ask Trick, "What did he say?"

"The victim did have a bug similar to the one that Gauld had. He's spoken to Pete and agreed that it's best that he goes in as soon as possible." Trick replies, "He also said there's no lead on Liam, but Alaric is still looking, and he'll keep us updated."

"Okay, so nothing that we weren't expecting," Riot replies.

Trick shakes his head, "No, it's really just a waiting game to see when he resurfaces and what his plan is."

"We need to get him out of the picture as quickly as possible, but I have a feeling this might be a long game kind of thing," Atlas replies.

“Definitely, but we’ll get there. We always do,” I agree.

“He also said that a case will be coming our way in the next couple of days, so I just wanted to make sure that everyone was okay to go on with it?” Trick asks, looking around at us all.

“I’m good with that,” I reply honestly.

“Me too,” Atlas says, and then adds, “It’s looking like Liam is going to be difficult to locate, regardless of whether he’s dead or alive, and Hunt would be stupid if he showed his face anywhere right now. We may as well do a case, and after everything that happened with Rylie, I think we can all do with a normal case.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” Luc replies, “a nice normal case that has fuck all to do with us or anyone we know.”

“That sounds lovely,” I admit, and everyone hums in agreement.

“Speaking of Rylie, have you heard anything from her?” Rage asks me.

I shake my head, “Not about the case. She did message me to check in though, which was nice of her and not something that I expected.”

“I think she’s going to surprise you this time,” Trick says, “I think she really intends on sticking around as much as she can with her being a ghost agent.”

“I hope so,” I reply.

The snow sticks around for longer than we thought it would, and today is the first day where it’s actually stopped. Pete called this morning and said they’ve cleared the road leading up to his place, but obviously not up our hill because it’s a private road. He’s heading out to Headquarters today to help the tech team design the devices to detect the bugs that Hunt commissioned, and so far, the designer is remaining elusive. All of the ones that are known to have designed something like the bugs didn’t develop this one, so there’s an unknown and very clever designer out there that they are still trying to identify.

We’re still stuck, and we will be for a couple of days. The horses are safe but starting to get restless since it hasn’t been safe enough to let them out.

Hopefully, the weather will improve quickly enough to the point where we can let them stretch their legs soon.

“Guys, Mr R knows that we’re stuck here, but he’s sent us the case file to go over and asked that we get to it as soon as we can get down the hill,” Trick announces over dinner on the fourth day, and then adds, “he’s got no update on Liam or Hunt.”

“Thank god,” Jensen mutters, “I’m going out of my damn mind.”

“Me too,” I agree.

“What’s the case?” Cash asks curiously while sticking a chopstick down the cast on his arm in order to scratch an itch.

Trick starts pressing a few buttons on his laptop and then gives us the highlights, “Okay, so I’ll send it to you guys in a minute so that you can each read through it, but the highlights are, there’s a boss of a big company who is blackmailing their employees and then using that control in order to get them to do a manner of extremely illegal things. Some of them are extremely dangerous, meaning that they end up dead. Thankfully, a very brave employee has decided to blow the whistle on the whole thing, and although law enforcement had suspected that he’s been involved in this sort of thing for a while, they don’t have any evidence. And although the employee has decided to tell all, the evidence that they’ve managed to gather is minimal at best.”

Rage leans forward in his seat, “So we’re going in to get some more evidence so that he can be taken down?”

“Yes,” Trick replies, and I grin. I love information gathering jobs, “oh, hang on. The employee knows where all the files that could incriminate him are being kept, so our job is to go and get them, take photos of the physical files, and download the ones that are kept on a personal computer at his residence. There are two different locations, so we’ll split up to do this.”

“It’s similar to that other job that we did a few years ago,” Riot comments.

“Yeah, hopefully, we won’t have to go in from the roof this time,” Cash chuckles.

“I liked that job,” Luc grins.

“Of course you did,” Atlas chuckles.

“I’ll send it to you guys now so you can look over the different locations, and then we can talk about who goes to which location,” Trick suggests.

“Are we going to need Pete for this?” I ask.

“I think we can get him to do a bit of research into the locations and the

boss, but he can do that from home. We won't need him to come with us, which means he can stay working with the tech team and hopefully find us a lead so that we can go after Hunt." Trick replies thoughtfully.

"Sounds good. I think he'll be happy with that," I say, knowing that pulling Pete away from what he's designing is going to bug him even though he won't say anything.

"Since Lyric's team was supposed to go out on a job soon, and for obvious reasons, they aren't going to be anymore, I'm going to be sending Elijah's team instead. I've already spoken to Elijah and trust that he knows his team well enough to know whether they're up for it or not and if they need more time off after their last job. If they did, then I would send it back to Mr R, and he can get another team to do it. Fortunately, they've agreed and seem to be looking forward to it. Since they're all down in the town where the roads have been cleared of the snow, they're heading out tomorrow." Trick explains.

"I bet Pete's not too happy about Elijah leaving so soon," Jensen smirks.

Trick chuckles, "Actually, he said it was a good idea because he's going to be so lost in his project that he wouldn't notice either way."

I wince, "No way did he actually say that to Elijah."

Trick nods, "Yeah, Elijah asked him about it while he was working on the project, and Pete immediately realised what he said and started to apologise profusely. Thankfully, Elijah is more than aware of how Pete can get and didn't take offense in the slightest."

"Thank fuck for that," I smile. It's instances like this that show me that Pete really has met the love of his life, and I don't need to worry about Elijah hurting him and me having to hide a body.

Peter

I still feel bad about how I reacted when Eli asked if I minded if they went on another job. He asked me while I thought I was close to finding the designer of the bugs that Gauld used, which means I didn't think about my answer, and my response was far too honest.

I could not love that man any fucking more than I do though. He didn't get

mad; he didn't get hurt; he just smiled and kissed me and then ended up reassuring me that it was okay and he wasn't angry.

"Hey guys," I greet Hector, Scott, and Will.

Mr R knows that I don't get on too well with the others, just because they're all quite a bit older than I am, and seem to think that because of that, I know nothing. I'd be able to deal with that if it wasn't for the fact that the majority of them were also extremely homophobic, and I refuse to deal with that, especially when I don't have to. I will not change or dull down who I am because of someone else. Once I explained all of that, Mr R he had absolutely no problem in making sure that I only had to deal with Hector, Scott, and Will.

I actually haven't seen some of the worst offenders from when I first arrived, and I have thought that maybe Mr R did something a bit more permanent with them other than just making sure that I never ran into them again. I haven't been curious enough actually to look into it though.

"Oh, thank god," Hector mutters as he looks up from something he's studying and gestures me over, "Take a look at this. I know you haven't seen the actual bug yet in person, but we're trying to find its unique composition so that we can calibrate the detector. This is a top priority and I don't want to have to make anyone wait for it."

"It has occurred to us that since the bug was able to get into the building undetected before that, there could be more in the building. We have no idea if one of them brought one in, and the whole building has been made aware of the potential security risk," Scott adds, with a heavy frown, as he crosses his arms over his chest.

"Is that why it's so quiet here still?" I ask, having noticed that there weren't as many people here as there usually would be at this point.

Will nods, "Yeah, in fact, there are very few agents here, and everyone has been made aware that they need to be incredibly careful about what they say."

"So, why are you guys talking so freely?" I ask them, worried that this is the one place where they really should be careful, considering what they are trying to do.

When, not if we succeed in making this detector, then the last thing we want is for Hunt to know that we've managed to do it. It would be nice to know that we are a step ahead of him for a change. Because so far that hasn't been the case, even when we've thought that we were a step ahead of him, we

haven't been, and it's incredibly frustrating.

"We went over the security footage, using some facial recognition technology, and they never came down here. You know already that other than Zemi's team, you're the only ones that come down here, and that's why we get you guys to test all of our new equipment," Hector adds, still standing impatiently by the microscope.

"Right, okay, so there's no chance that a bug was planted down here?" I ask just to make sure.

"Nope, there's no chance. The only bugs down here are the ones recovered from the victims, and they've both been disabled," Scott reassures me.

Chapter Six

Pete

“Well, in that case, let’s see what we can find and get this detector designed and built,” I tell them with a smile.

I have no idea how long I’ve spent staring at this tiny chip, and it really is fucking tiny. I’d like to meet the M.E because whoever they are is fucking amazing at their job to be able to find this tiny fucking thing on a body.

“Coffee,” Will groans as he leans back from his computer, where he’s been trying to work the formula for the complicated device.

“Oh hell, me too,” I agree, “my eyes are fucking blurry, but I think I’m getting close to understanding how it was put together.”

“Any idea who designed it yet?” Hector asks me, taking a break from his own work.

I shake my head with a frown, “No, I still have no idea, and that means that my initial idea of there being another unknown designer is correct.”

“Which is worrying in itself because if they’re clever enough to design this, what else are they designing and for who?” Scott adds.

“And why haven’t we heard of them?” I ask them, “Usually, someone who is this skilled comes with an ego as well, a well-deserved one, yet we haven’t seen or heard anything.”

“That’s an excellent point. It actually makes me more suspicious that they are a complete unknown than it would if we knew of them,” Will replies thoughtfully.

I stand up, “I feel like we could talk about this for ages and still not get the answers we want. We’re so close to figuring out how to configure the new devices that I think we should just focus on that for now. Plus, I really need coffee.”

“God, me too,” Hector chuckles, already turning back to his work like the others have.

Fortunately, I know their coffee orders because trying to get them to talk

now that they've each refocused on the task at hand would be freaking difficult. Walking to the coffee shop in the lobby, I realise that I probably should have gotten up sooner since my legs are so stiff and I have a cramp threatening.

My phone ringing distracts me, and I slow down as I answer it, "Hey, Dad, is everything okay?"

"Yes, of course, why wouldn't it be?" my dad replies, and I roll my eyes.

"Because you're calling me, and you usually message first when you call during the week and during work hours," I remind him, feeling amused.

"Oh shit are you busy?" he asks, and I can hear Pa in the background saying he tried to warn him.

"No, actually, I have a few minutes," I reassure him, "what's up?"

"Oh good," he replies, the excitement entering his voice again. "It's just about your engagement party. I know that you don't know what dates you've got free yet, but I was just wondering what colour scheme you wanted; then I can start to get some things together with Elijah's parents and send the ideas over to you guys so you can give me a better idea of what you do and don't like."

I don't know why I didn't immediately assume that it was about the engagement party; it's pretty much all that he's been talking about when we do our catch ups during the week. Fortunately, this is something Eli and I have spoken about, so at least I can give him an answer now. He is not patient in the slightest.

"We were thinking white and gold with very few like evergreen accents," I tell him, "do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, that's perfect. I can definitely work with that." Without saying goodbye, he immediately hangs up.

I chuckle quietly to myself as I continue toward the coffee shop, tapping out a message to Elijah as I go.

Me: Heads up, gorgeous, my dad just called about our colour scheme for the engagement party. I assume that you're going to get a call any minute. Love you!

Elijah: On the phone to them and my parents now, they're all together. Love you too.

I grin, grateful that I do have the excuse that I'm working. My dad can talk. In fact, that's where I get it from, so Elijah is going to be on the phone for a really long time, especially if his parents are there too, and they realise

that he's not working.

I just send him back a heart emoji and then put my phone away so I can order the coffees for the guys and me. The baristas have always been nice to me; I have never actually had a problem with them, and they haven't behaved like the rest of the agents employed here. I'm assuming that's because they couldn't give a shit if we get more jobs than them or any of that other bullshit, and that's purely because they aren't agents.

They're highly trained, and they have a higher level of clearance than most police officers because they have to step foot in this building, and they are trained in the very basics in the very unlikely case that we come under attack. That's it. They're taught to hide in an emergency, and there's a special security door behind the counter where they can go.

Because of all of that, they don't care who we are so long as we're nice to them.

"Thanks, man," I tell the guy as he hands me a carrier of coffee and a bag of sweet treats too.

I had to get those because if I went back without them, there would've been an uproar.

I'm back in the hallways heading back to the tech lab and hoping that the guys have gotten a bit further with what we're trying to achieve when my phone starts to ring again and I balance everything in one hand as I pull out my phone and answer it when I see its Trick.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, and I realise that it seems to be my go-to greeting now.

"Hey man, yeah," Trick replies, his voice relaxed, so at least I know nothing has gone wrong in the time I haven't been able to see them. "I'm sorry to interrupt; I just needed to run some stuff by you and get you caught up."

Pushing through the door to the lab, I point to the coffee and food before grabbing mine and moving further into the lab and through a door into a lounge of sorts, "No worries, I'm actually on a coffee break right now I needed to stretch my legs a bit, and I always know I need a break when I start to see double. What's up?"

He chuckles, "Yeah, definitely time to take a break. Ever will be pleased you're actually taking a break in the first place. We've got a job through from Mr R."

"Do you need me?" I ask, interrupting him.

He chuckles, “We do, but I don’t think we need you to come on the job with us unless you want to.”

“Alright, what do you need from me?”

He goes on to explain the job and that he needs me to do some research into the dickhead boss and the two areas where the employee has said that the information is.

“That’s the job. What do you want to do?” Trick asks me.

“I think you’re right. You don’t really need me for this one. You all know how to download stuff onto the USB, and I’ve shown you quicker ways to do it. Not only that, but I can do the research side of it around what I’m doing now, and I’d prefer to stay working on this. We’re so close to figuring it out so that we can get the devices built, and I don’t want to lose momentum right now. Are you guys sure that you don’t need me on the actual job?”

“No, we’re absolutely fine, man, and I stand by what I said earlier. You’re where you are needed most. This job has very little tech stuff involved. If that changes, we’ll let you know.”

“Great, that works for me. I’ll get on with the research as soon as possible and get it sent over to you. It shouldn’t take me too long to do,” I reply, wanting to get back to work now.

“Thanks, man,” Trick replies, “talk soon.”

After hanging up, I head back out to the main lab area and jump straight back into figuring this shit out. Between the three of us, we should have it done in no time. Before I fully get absorbed in what I’m doing again, I quickly set an alarm on my phone so that I know when I need to take a break next; otherwise, I will just carry on working. Ever somehow always knows when I do that, and then she gets mad at me, and honestly, it gets a bit scary.

It’s a good job, that I know it’s because she loves me. When I take my next break, I will also do the research that Trick needs me to do; it really shouldn’t take me that long at all.

Ever

“Hey, Baby, I thought you might want a bedtime cupcake,” Rafe says, holding one up as he walks through my door.

“Oh, definitely yes,” I reply, dislodging Runa, who huffs at me and then jumps off the bed, “are you staying in here tonight?”

He smiles happily as I scoff the cupcake in a very unladylike manner before he answers me, “If you want me to.”

“I’d love you to. It seems like it’s been far too long,” I reply and then add with a smile, “be warned, I’ve been watching my favourite TV show from the beginning.”

“Again?” Rafe chuckles as he strips down and gets into the bed.

I nod, “Yep, I needed a bit of comfort and didn’t really want to have to think about what I was watching.”

“I get that,” he replies, lifting up his arm so I can lie on his chest, “come here.”

My whole body relaxes as he wraps his arm around me, and I throw my leg over his waist, snuggling as close to him as I can get without actually being on top of him. It’s not that I wasn’t relaxed before; it’s just that snuggling up to Rafe or any of my men and listening to their heartbeat is a whole other level of calm.

We must only watch about ten minutes of the show before he picks me up, moving me so that I’m completely on top of him and straddling him. I’m only wearing underwear; it’s easy to tell what he has on his mind when our hips meet.

My whole body heats as my clit pulses, and my pussy clenches in anticipation.

He smirks, knowing me well enough to know that I am thoroughly distracted now. He runs his hands down my naked back and grips my ass, grinding me down on his boxer-covered dick and making me hiss.

“Still want to watch your show, Baby?” his voice comes out as a deep growl.

I rapidly shake my head, leaning forward until my lips are a hairsbreadth away from his as I reply, “Hell fucking no.”

He growls as he switches our positions, doing it so skillfully that I’m barely jostled and feeling incredibly turned on by his show of strength. His tongue tangles with mine as our bodies move against each other creating a delicious friction that has my toes curling with need as my teeth bite into Rafe’s plump lip and my nails drag down his back, making his chest rumble with approval.

He starts to kiss down my neck, his fingers trailing down my body,

plucking at my nipples and making my back arch as he bites my neck at the same time. When his hands get to my underwear, he sits up and takes them down my legs, his fingers trailing across my skin in the most tantalizing way before he quickly gets rid of his own underwear and then kisses up the inside of my thigh, spreading my legs as wide as they'll go.

He blows a teasing breath over my clit, my pussy clenches, and I throw my head back as a breathy moan escapes me.

My hands fly to thread through his hair, gripping tightly as his tongue circles my clit. My eyes are half open, and I watch as he sucks his middle finger into his mouth, making me shudder in anticipation. His mouth moves to my clit again, his tongue swirling with just the right amount of pressure as his fingers part my folds and his thumb pulses into my pussy. That finger that he sucked circles my ass, teasingly moving in a small amount, making me groan before he moves it back, his tongue still working my clit, and his thumb circles inside me, adding even more sensations.

I am so close to the edge, and when Rafe finally stops teasing my ass and fully sheaths his finger before he starts moving in tandem, my orgasm tears through me with a speed and intensity that has me almost seeing stars as he continues to pulse his finger and thumb, his tongue slowing down, as I ride out my orgasm another one takes me by surprise, this one more like a rolling wave and I swear I black out for a second.

Holy fuck.

Rafe's gaze is pure heat as he crawls up my body, kissing as he goes until his mouth meets mine in a sensual kiss; his dick nudges my entrance, my pussy still pulsing from my orgasm. My back arches, and I let out a loud moan as he starts to move inside me.

I lift my hips to meet his, urging him to move faster, my nails digging into his back as he understands what I'm silently asking for, and then speeds up. He pushes up on his hands, our eyes connecting as he moves faster. I throw my head back, gripping his ass at the intense feelings going through me.

His lips meet mine again before he buries his head in my neck and growls as he reaches his own release. He kisses me again and then rolls off me, pulling me close as our legs tangle together, and we both catch our breath. My hands move over his chest, drawing lazy patterns, and as I feel my eyes get heavy, I force myself to get up and clean up before crawling back into bed. Rafe pulls me into his arms as we fall back into our original position.

I'm asleep within minutes.

Thankfully, it hasn't snowed for long enough now that we can finally let the horses out, and Rage and I get up early, grab a travel mug of hot coffee, and then make our way up to the barn on the four-wheelers with Rafe yelling after us that we really should have breakfast before we do anything. The thing is, Rage and I are both aware of how long the horses have been stuck in now, and we want to let them out to have some decent exercise just in case it starts snowing again. I mean, we thought it was the end of the heavy snowfall a few days ago and we were very wrong about that.

I grin as I walk through the barn doors, and a loud, whiny, and grumpy huff greets me.

"I know baby, I'm sorry," I tell Tank, and then add, "do you want to go out?"

He whinnies again, and I pull open the door. I don't bother with a halter because he follows me anyway, even when he's excited and restless like he is now. I also don't use a halter because when we get to their field, he's going to take off, and I'd rather not still be attached to him.

Rage does the same, and we're soon leading them out of their stalls and the short distance to their pasture. As we expected, they all take off immediately and start bucking and playing and moving as fast as they can. Rage has the same idea as me, and we just sit there and watch them play with matching smiles on our faces.

After a while my mind starts to wonder and I find myself asking him, "If Liam does get involved, if he's alive, do you think Atlas is really going to be okay?"

Rage turns to look at me and takes his time to answer before he nods, "Yes, I think he will. Liam was harsh, an absolute fucking asshole with how he treated Atlas, but the serious torture came from Blake. Atlas is in a different place than he was and he has all of us supporting him; he's also smart enough now to tell us if he's struggling with something, and then we can take him away from the situation and help him to deal with it."

I nod, feeling a weight lift from my mind, "Good, I was hoping that was

going to be your answer. The last thing I want is Atlas to be triggered by any of this. I know that he seems fine and says he is, but I thought since you knew him when it was all going on you'd have better insight into whether he really is okay or not."

"I can understand that, I'd be doing the same," he replies, before he pulls me in for a kiss and then sighs and adds, "come on, we'd better get on with cleaning these stalls. I'm getting hungry, and I want breakfast."

"Me too," I reply, the mention of food now making me realise just how hungry I am.

We make quick work of the stalls since the promise of breakfast is now fueling us, and we race back down to the house. Once we're done, we walk through the doors to amazing smells that make my mouth water.

I have to admit that I'm so hungry that I strip my snow gear off and approach the table to take my seat with single mindedness, I have no idea if the guys spoke to me, all of my attention is on the food and fresh coffee.

Chapter Seven

Eventually, I glance up from my food to look around the table, and although most of them are focused on their own food, Jensen is looking at me with a smirk.

“Good morning, Angel,” he greets me.

“I was hungry,” I retort defensively although I don’t really know why I’m defensive.

“I know Angel,” he smiles.

It’s then I notice that he’s in workout gear, “Did you have a good workout?”

He lights up, “I did. I managed to push it a bit further than yesterday, and I’m running now. Don’t worry, I’m still being careful. I’m pushing myself, but I’m not pushing myself to the point where I have to worry about reinjuring myself.”

“I’m really proud of you,” I tell him honestly. “Just think, not that long ago, and you used to refuse to run unless you had to.”

He chuckles, “Weirdly enough, I’m actually starting to like it, and I don’t know if I’m okay with that or not.”

I giggle, “I know what you mean. I actually enjoyed running on the treadmill when I couldn’t sleep, but like hell would I choose to do it.”

“Yeah, but that’s my point. I would choose to run. That’s how much I’m enjoying it now.”

My eyes widen, “Wow, okay, that is a big change from how you used to feel about running.”

“Exactly,” Jensen frowns.

Before I can console him, since he’s very clearly distressed about the fact that he likes running, my phone starts to ring, and I pull it out, “Hey Pete, how’re you? Are you eating? Did you shower?”

He chuckles, no doubt thanks to my rapid-fire questions, and answers them one by one, “I’m good. I have eaten more than junk food before you ask me that too. Also, I am not a stinky fucker, and I have showered.”

I burst out laughing at his responses but instantly feel better now that I know that he is okay. “Good, now what’s up?”

“Put me on speakerphone? It’s an official update,” he replies, and I can still hear the amusement in his voice.

After pressing a few buttons, I say, “Alright, Pete, you’re on speaker. Go ahead.”

There’s no need to get anyone else’s attention because they all started listening when they realised it was Pete on the phone.

“Great. So, we’ve developed the plans for the main device that’s going to detect the bugs that Hunt is putting into people, so now it’s just a case of building it and working out the kinks for the handheld one. This is obviously a top priority, so Mr R is throwing a lot of money at this project, so it shouldn’t take too long to do.” Pete tells us.

“Wow, that was fast,” Rage says, his eyebrows raised.

“Well, I was already thinking that we needed it, so it’s been something that I’ve been doing with our spare time since the guys from the lab had sent me some really detailed photographs of the bug from every angle conceivable, and all of the specs so I knew enough to get started. Then we got snowed in, and I could put nearly all my time into it, so I had a pretty good idea of what would work. I just had to go over the chip in person to ensure that my design would work. Thankfully, it only needed a few minor tweaks, and then it was done. For some reason though, it’s not working as efficiently as it should for the smaller one, so I need to figure that out.”

“That’s damn impressive, man,” Atlas compliments him.

“Thanks,” Pete replies, trying to sound casual, but you can hear the pride in his voice, and he should be proud. There are very few people who can do what he can with such apparent ease. He’s a damn genius when it comes to tech. “I’m also nearly done with my research on Fairmicheal, and I should have it to you within an hour.”

“Damn, you really have been busy. You’ve put the rest of us to shame, that’s for sure,” Trick chuckles. “Seriously though, thanks, man. You’ve done a great job.”

“You know I love this sort of thing,” Pete replies happily.

“I’m assuming that because you still need to work on the handheld device, you still won’t be joining us on the mission?” Trick asks him.

“No, not unless you need me,” Pete replies.

“We’re good man. The same still applies; we can do this,” Rafe replies, for

all of us.

“Great,” Pete adds, “Elijah left for his job yesterday, so I’m just going to finish up the research and send it over, and then I’m heading back to the lab.”

“Sounds good, man, keep us updated.” Trick replies.

“Will do,” he says before hanging up.

“I think we’re very lucky that we have Pete, and I know Mr R is grateful that he still wants to be involved in the tech side of things even though he’s on a team.” Luc points out.

“Especially since he’s a very skilled agent. He could’ve easily chosen just to do that and not be involved with any of the tech stuff apart from as a hobby and doing it in his downtime.” Jensen points out.

“I hadn’t thought about it like that, but you’re right,” Cash replies thoughtfully.

“Oh, Jynx messaged while we were on the phone,” I announce as I notice the notification, “she said she tried to call but couldn’t get through. She and the guys have left to head back home, but Ace is still at the house, playing with the bomb.”

“Playing?” Rage asks, his eyebrow raised.

I chuckle, “It’s Ace and a bomb that he hasn’t seen before. Of course, he’s playing with it.”

“Okay, fair point,” Rage admits.

“As soon as we have the information through, we can start to go over the plan for the job,” Trick says.

We all nod in agreement and then break up to do our own thing. I’m trying to let the lack of progress with anything to do with Hunt and actually capturing not irritate me as it did with the Rylie case. It’s easier this time because we aren’t rescuing anyone. I guess I should want to get revenge for my mother, and there is a small part of me that does, purely because she is my mother and she did birth me. But the more significant part of me just wants to get Hunt because he is a massive danger to everyone, and that right now is a bigger concern for me.

It's difficult to reconcile the fact that I don't want to bring Shadow out to play, but she really was a stranger to me. I can view her death as I'd view any victim. I'm sad, but really, I'm angry about how she treated me when she was alive. I know I'm going to need to talk to someone who has the qualifications to help me deal with this jumble of things that I'm feeling, and I will. Just not

right now when it's so raw.

I think it's made all that more difficult because I had questions that I'm now never going to get the answers to, and although I had already resigned myself to that, having not wanted to meet her or get to know her, that option has now been permanently taken away from me, and that is something that I'm struggling with.

I decide that my emotions are all over the freaking place, and until I can focus my attention and energy on something else like the case, I'm going to need to do something about this swirl of emotion before it drags me under. As always, I automatically turn to fighting it out.

I quickly get changed into something I can easily move in, grab my headphones, and then head out of my bedroom door, meeting Cash in the hallway. He smiles when he sees me, but there's a hint of worry in his expression too.

As he pulls me into his arms and holds me close, he asks me, "Are you okay? Is this a normal workout, or an everything got too much workout?"

I shouldn't be surprised that with his arms wrapped around me, my racing thoughts go quiet, and I'm no longer feeling so on edge and wound too tight.

"A bit of both, more the second reason than the first, I guess," I answer him honestly.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" he asks me.

I think it about it, him holding me like he is really is helping, and although I've thought about it a lot and I've spoken to Jynx about it to a certain extent, even she doesn't know me as well as my men know me, maybe it would help to talk it through with him. I've clearly taken too long to answer him because he leans back slightly so that he can look down at me, his hazel eyes studying me closely as his lips move down into a frown behind the beard he's sporting at the moment since it's not that easy to shave with a cast.

I love it when he grows his beard out so that it's a bit unruly.

"Il Mio Cuore?" he asks me gently.

"This helps to calm the racing thoughts," I tell him and then add somewhat hesitantly, although I have no idea why, because it's Cash, "can I talk to you about it though?"

His flash with surprise ever so briefly before he nods, "Of course, any time you know that. Do you want to talk in my room or yours?"

"Yours, I like your bed more," I admit with a grin as we make our way down the hallway, "your mattress is extra soft, and I love it."

He chuckles as we walk into his room, which is almost always tidy, and I immediately run and jump so that I'm on his bed, sighing in happiness as I wriggle around on the soft as a cloud mattress.

When I glance at Cash, he's watching me with a soft smile and love shining in his eyes, "Wow, you really love my mattress, huh?"

"I really do, I've been contemplating how I could steal it without you realising, but I always get stuck on how I'd get the giant fucking thing through the door and down the hallway to my room." I frown and then point at Cash, who is clearly trying not to laugh, "But mark my words, handsome, I will have it one day."

He can't hold in his laughter any longer as he walks over to the bed and settles down next to me, pulling me close and making my whole body relax in the process.

"Do you want to know a secret, my beautiful girlfriend?"

Butterflies take flight in my stomach as they always do when one of them compliments me, and I reply, "Of course, I want to know."

"The reason my mattress is so soft is because I've actually got two mattress toppers on it. I'll get you the same so that you don't injure yourself trying to steal my one."

I sit up straight as I gasp and then pull a weird face, "Why did it not occur to me to ask you where you got your mattress from? Why did I immediately go to trying to come up with a plan to steal it?"

He grins, his eyes amused, "Because you aren't normal."

I try desperately to hold in my smile as I reply as seriously as I can, "Well, that was rude."

He chuckles, "Oh, come on, you're not offended. One of your favourite sayings is, 'I'd rather be weird than normal; normal is boring'. Besides, I love that you aren't normal. We all do."

I huff and then grin, "Okay, you may have a point."

He rolls his eyes with amusement as I settle back down with my head on his chest. We're silent for a few moments as I just breathe in the peace and comfort that he offers.

"Do you still want to talk, il Mio Cuore, or would you like to just stay like this? I'm honestly more than fine with either."

"I want to talk, but can we put the TV on so I don't feel like all the attention is on me, even though it is?"

"Of course, we can. Rafe told me that you're watching your favourite from

the beginning again?”

I smile, “Yeah, I am. I need the extra comfort.”

“I understand. Which episode are you?”

I tell him where I’m up to, and he puts it on and then settles back down, knowing that I’ll start talking when I’m ready. I just need to get my thoughts in order before I start.

We must have watched at least one full episode before I start talking. Once I start, I can’t seem to stop, and he just sits there patiently listening as I tell him all of my confusing feelings, about how I am fine with the fact she’s dead, only feeling about it as I usually would about a victim but that I’m angry that I won’t get any of the answers that I need and that she left me with my father. I explain all of it, every complex feeling, and by doing so, I realise that I am actually feeling a hell of a lot more than I thought I was.

By the time I’m done talking, I’m exhausted but feeling a lot better than I did. It turns out I just needed someone to listen to every single thing without judgment or trying to interrupt, and that’s what Cash did for me.

When he’s sure that I’m finished, he kisses the top of my head, pulling me closer and saying, “I know that you know that everything that you’re feeling is completely normal and perfectly okay and that most people in your situation would feel exactly the same. I just wanted to say that to you again because I think it’s important. I also want you to know that I think you are amazingly strong, and like we’ve all said, if you start to struggle more with this case as we get further into it, just let us know, and we’ll either hand the case over to someone else or figure out a way for you to be more comfortable.”

He goes on to say all the things that I need to hear and some that I don’t but help anyway, and I find myself really grateful that I decided to speak to him rather than go and work out. Working out wouldn’t have given me this sense of peace, and I think that it’s going to last this time. I got a lot off my chest, and I needed to, more so than I thought I did, apparently. In fact, I’ve spoken so much that my throat feels scratchy.

“Thank you for being there for me and for letting me just talk it all out. I definitely needed that,” I tell him as I prop myself up so that I can look at him properly.

He moves so he can kiss me, his beard tickling my face before he pulls back slightly, “I’d definitely agree that you needed to get that off your chest, and thank you for trusting me with it.”

I smile and then push up on his chest so that I can get closer to him, “You know, with your beard and plaid shirt, you look like a sexy lumberjack.”

His eyebrows raise slightly as his lips twitch, and he pulls me closer, “Is that so? We all know how much you like lumberjacks.”

I shrug as I move even closer, swinging my leg over him and moving so my lips are close to his, “I’ve never denied it.”

I flick my tongue out, catching his lips and making him growl as he pulls my lips to meet his in an almost bruising kiss. His arms hold me tightly as his one good hand moves down my back and clenches my ass before smacking it. He soothes the sting with a rub, and I nip his lip in retaliation. I pull open his shirt, popping buttons off in the process and making him curse as I drag my nails down his chest, his eyes wild with need.

Thank god I chose to wear loose workout stuff today and not my stupidly tight stuff because I don’t want to waste time with taking clothes off. In no time at all, we’re both naked, although when he tries to take off his shirt though, I shake my head and tell him to keep it on because it gives the most tantalising view of his golden and toned abs. I wriggle my way down his body, kissing and licking as I go, and when I bite the soft, sensitive skin by his hip, he curses in Italian. Making my need for him heighten even more.

Wrapping my hand around his dick, I pump it twice, making him groan as his hips lift, as I lick his shaft from base to tip, my other hand moving to his balls and making him once again curse in Italian as his hands move to grip my hair.

“Good girl,” he rasps, and my whole body lights up. I don’t know what it is about being told I’m a good girl in this situation, but it really does something for me.

I swirl my tongue around the tip of his dick before I hum as I take him in my mouth, using my hand to increase his pleasure before I start to bob my head, sucking and swirling my tongue at the same time. I slowly run my other hand up his chest and over the ridges of his abs before digging my nails in and making his hips buck as he once again starts to curse in Italian before he uses the grip he has on my hair to pull me up his body.

I grin proudly at the feral heat in his eyes before kissing up his chest and then fusing my lips to his. His hand moves down between us as I lift my hips slightly, and his fingers swirl my clit, making me shudder as he pumps them inside my pussy twice before lining up his dick and plunging inside me.

Chapter Eight

I tear my mouth away from his as I cry out in pleasure, and both of us start moving together. I rock my hips, increasing the pressure against my clit as Cash lifts me, wrapping his cast arm around me to hold me in place as he uses his other one to help me sit up and lean against the headboard of the bed. Once sat up, he leans forward and takes my nipple in his mouth, swirling his tongue around the stiff peak before he sucks, making my head tip back in pleasure as my hands weave through his hair and pull.

This angle is even better for increasing the pressure against my clit, and with Cash playing with my nipple as well, I feel my orgasm start to build. He holds me tightly as we move together, and my hands move away from his hair as he releases my nipple with a pop and kisses me, his tongue tangling with mine. My hands grip the headboard, holding on and using it for leverage as I increase my speed, driving us both closer to the edge.

My orgasm rolls through me, my pussy clenching around Cash and pulling him into his own orgasm as we both moan in pleasure and he curses in Italian. Which I find stupidly hot.

I practically collapse on top of him, unable to hold myself up anymore. His hand moves up and down my back as we catch our breath, and then I roll off him as we wrap around each other.

After a while, I get up and clean up, getting dressed again as Cash does the same; when I notice that he's holding his arm more carefully, I frown, "Is your arm okay?"

"It aches a bit. I kind of forgot to be as careful as I should be. I was more focused on better things." He grins.

"Well, fuck. Have you got some painkillers up here?" I ask, unable to hide the worry in my voice.

He pulls me to stand in between his jean-clad thighs, and my hands move around his neck, "No, but we've got some downstairs, and Rafe just texted me and said that dinner is going to be ready in ten minutes, so I can get some then. Stop worrying; it's only aching. I haven't rebroken it or anything like

that.”

“You promise?” I ask him, still worrying because, of course I’m going to.

“I promise,” he replies, kissing me softly. “Now, let’s go and get dinner because I’m starving, and I can smell whatever it is from here, and it’s making my mouth water.”

I don’t need to be told twice, and I rush from the room, Cash’s laughter following me as I make my way downstairs and through into the extension. I’m met by the smiling faces of all of my men, and I go around giving them each a kiss because I feel a hell of a lot lighter than I did only hours ago. Cash sits down next to a smiling Trick and Jensen, and I realise that he hasn’t got any painkillers with him, so before I sit down to the delicious looking chicken dish that Rafe has prepared, I make my way back into the kitchen and grab him some. There are already drinks on the table, so I don’t bother getting him a drink too.

“Thank you,” he says as I hand them to him and smiles softly.

I nod and then take my seat between Riot and Luc. Looking at Rafe, I say, “As always, this smells absolutely delicious.”

“Thank you, Baby,” he replies, as everyone starts to dish up their food and tuck in.

I’m just about to lift the fork to my mouth, absolutely freaking starving now that I’ve got the smells wafting around me when my phone starts to ring. I seriously contemplate ignoring it until I’ve finished eating my food, but we still haven’t heard anything from Lyric and the guys, and it could be her. I stuff the food in my mouth anyway because it’s already halfway there, and I’m fucking hungry, and then I pull out my phone.

My eyebrows rise in surprise as I read the caller ID; definitely not who I thought was going to call me. I pick it up and put it on speakerphone since I’m being stared at curiously by all of my men, the nosey fuckers, “Hey, Rylie, everything okay?”

“Hey, Girl,” she greets me happily. “I’m all good. I just had some info for you guys. Am I on speakerphone?”

“Oh great, and yeah, you are. The guys are just as nosey as they’ve always been.” I reply, earning teasing glares from the guys in response.

Rylie laughs and then says, “I’m glad some things have stayed the same. So, I’ve managed to find a link between the victim and Hunt. Mr R gave me Trick’s secured email address, so I’ve sent it through to that. He’s also brought me on as a consultant for this case so I can be seen around

headquarters, and no one is going to question it too much.”

“Great, thanks, Rylie,” Atlas replies.

“What about Liam? Have you had any luck locating him?” Trick asks curiously.

“No, unfortunately not. I have another lead that I want to follow up regarding Hunt, and I’ll let you know if I find anything that I think is worth getting you guys out for,” Rylie replies.

“Understood. Remember to call us in, though. Recon only,” Trick reminds her.

“I know, don’t worry,” she replies, sounding slightly amused. “I’m sorry, but I can’t chat. I’ve got an appointment to make with my contact. I’ll speak soon though. Bye, guys.”

“Bye,” we all manage to get out before she hangs up.

“I get the feeling that something more might have been happening then,” Rage smirks as he digs back into his food.

“Oh, for sure,” I reply. I put my phone back down and then dig in.

“Do you want to have a look at what she sent through now, or would you like to eat first?” Trick asks me.

“I want to eat first,” I reply. “You never know what could be in there, and it could mean that we don’t get to eat for a while, or I won’t feel like eating for a while, and I can’t deal with that. So I want to eat now.”

“Okay, Sweetheart,” Trick replies, “that’s what we’ll do then.”

“You make a good point. The amount of times we’ve decided to look over a case while we’re having lunch and ended up not being able to finish it because of what’s been in the case file has been far more often than it should have been.” Atlas replies.

“Yeah, you would have thought we would have learned our lesson after the first time we did it,” Jensen agrees.

We don’t rush the rest of dinner, mostly because it tastes so good that it would be a crime not to enjoy it as much as we possibly could. After we have finished though, we clear everything up and then head back into the front room, where Trick links up his laptop to the TV. Despite having watched Pete do this hundreds of times now, it takes Trick a bit longer to work it out and probably isn’t helped by the fact that the rest of us keep shouting out suggestions on how to do it and inevitably getting it wrong and confusing him.

“Guys, seriously,” Trick says over all of the suggestions, sounding

frustrated, “just let me work it out.”

“Sorry, dude,” Luc replies for all of us, even though he looks decidedly amused at the whole situation.

Trick manages to link it up surprisingly quickly after we all stop helping him; go figure.

“Alright, let's see what Rylie managed to send me and how Amelia and Hunt were linked.” Trick says as he taps on a few buttons and brings up the email, “It looks like there are files attached.”

The room is silent for a few moments while we look over the photos in front of us. They look like surveillance photos from weird angles where the subjects definitely aren't aware they're being photographed.

“Well, I was not expecting that,” I mutter, “I thought maybe he kidnapped her or Liam traded her, although after all the effort he went to in order to save her in the first place, I don't know why he would just trade her, but it is a possibility.”

“I must admit that I thought something similar,” Cash replies with a frown.

“She definitely doesn't look like she's there unwillingly,” Rage says, pointing out the obvious as we all look at the photograph of Amelia holding hands with Hunt at some sort of event and looking up at him lovingly.

“They were a couple,” Riot says, sounding surprised, and he's not the only one.

“Surely that would mean that Liam is dead then?” Rafe asks.

“I don't think he'd take too kindly to Amelia being with someone else,” Rage comments.

“No. That's true. If he is dead though, then that means all of these people trying to find him aren't going to be able to, and we're not going to get any of the answers that we needed either.” Atlas points out.

I study him for a moment, making sure that he's okay, and he seems to be. I don't know whether that will change when we get the confirmation either way. His relationship with his father is more complicated than mine was with my mother, and he has years and years of unresolved shit to deal with when it comes to him. I have a few childhood years and then a couple more after realising she wasn't dead and just abandoned me to my fate.

There's a lot of baggage there.

I know that I won't be the only one keeping an eye on him and looking for any signs that he's been triggered. Rage, in particular, is watching him

because he's known him for so long and is aware of more potential triggers than we are because he was there.

"Well, we've got the best people working on it, on multiple sides of the law too, so I would assume that between them all, we will be able to locate him one way or another and get at least some answers," Rage replies to Atlas and the rest of us nod in agreement.

"At least we know what Amelia was doing with Hunt now, although he clearly can't have cared about her very much if he was willing to strap a bomb to her, and there's no doubt that the bomb was active," I reply.

"But it does raise the question of, was there a plan in place to make sure that she didn't die? Was she just supposed to threaten us and then walk away and let it be known that Hunt could get to us if he wanted to?" Riot asks.

"If that were the case though, that would suggest that the shooter wasn't associated with Hunt and killed her for some other reason. Maybe something to do with Liam? He seems like the kind of person that would take the standpoint that if I can't have you, then no one can," Jensen suggests.

"We know that the shooter was involved with Hunt though, because of the laptop with the Looney Tunes playing on it. It appears that's his weird as fuck calling card, so Hunt did intend to kill her," Rafe reminds us.

"Good point, but why didn't he just kill her using the explosives? It would have dealt with us, too," Trick asks.

"I think that may have been ego on his part," I suggest, and when everyone looks at me curiously, I add, "he's said he shouldn't have underestimated the organisation, and we're the only ones who have come even remotely close to catching him. I think he wants to play the game as it were."

"That's an interesting way to look at it," Atlas muses, while the others all look contemplative too.

"That would make some sense. It's why he chooses to leave the calling card videos in the first place; it's a solid thing that links him to both the warehouse and Amelia's murder. Obviously, Amelia said that Hunt sent her with the message, but other than what Gauld told us, we didn't really have any other true indication that Hunt was involved. This is extra confirmation that he was, in fact, the owner of that warehouse, as Gauld had told us." Luc adds.

"Pete just sent an email through with the research that we needed," Trick suddenly announces, changing the subject and clicking on the email. "I'll forward it to you all now. Let me know when you've read through it, and we

can start to plan this job. We're just going to go around in circles trying to work out the Hunt case without any more evidence, so if it's okay with everyone, we'll just put a pin in that for the moment."

"Sounds good, man," Atlas replies, the rest of us all making sounds of agreement.

It's not long until all of our phones ping, and we're reading over the information that Pete has managed to dig up on our target and the places where the information that we need to acquire is being kept. It looks reasonably straightforward; he has security at his home, but surprisingly not that high tech and we've actually come across it before, so we know where the weaknesses in the system tend to be and how to exploit them.

The office building, however, is going to be slightly more complicated, not go in via the roof complicated, but complex enough that we're going to have to get a bit more creative about how we get in. Fortunately for us, Pete has already realised this, and his email says that he's identified two janitors that actually have the clearance to clean the entire building, including the area that we need. He's sent them an official email giving them tomorrow night off. It's so cliché, but sometimes the old tricks of the trade work, and that's true in this case.

The house is going to take some more stealth, but according to Pete's email, he lives alone and is on a date with his current girlfriend from eight onwards. Pete has sent an itinerary of his night, and he shouldn't be back until quite late. It always amazes me how much information Pete can find in such a short amount of time. He's also sent instructions and things on how to get around the security systems and copy the hard drives of the computers.

"Everyone had enough time to read through it?" Trick asks us.

"Two more minutes, I'm nearly done," Rage replies, and Cash nods in agreement, his eyes still moving over the screen of his phone as he reads it.

As soon as those that needed a bit more time are done, we all get down to the planning side of the job.

"I guess, since Pete has the Janitors off tomorrow night, that's when we're going in," Atlas says.

"Yeah, we don't want to drag this case out anyway, and I know that several of you are getting restless, so tomorrow night works well. He's on his date too, so we should be able to hit both places at the same time and get the information to the relevant sources as quickly as possible." Trick replies.

"Alright, so who is going where?" Cash asks and then adds, "We definitely

need someone in the surveillance van at both places; even though it seems fairly straightforward, there are always risks, and we don't want him to know that we have the information that we do until it's too late."

"Yeah, you're right. Does anyone have any preferences as to where they want to be?" Trick asks, and when no one seems too bothered, he continues, "Okay, Ever, Rage, Riot, and Rafe, you guys can be at the house, and I will be on surveillance."

"Sounds good to me," I reply.

"Luc and Jensen, I want you two going in as the janitors. This is a fairly straightforward case, but I need you to be honest with me. Are you physically up for this?" he asks Jensen.

Jensen really thinks about his answer, which I know must be difficult considering that he has hated being on the sidelines and desperately wants to be involved in a case.

"I think I'm up to it. I've been running, and I hardly get any pain now unless I really push myself. I haven't done any sparring yet, but I know that I can," he replies, and then, surprising me, he turns to look at Luc, "What do you think?"

Luc smiles, "He can handle this. As you've said, it's a fairly straightforward job, and besides, he can absolutely still use weapons. It will be a good job to test himself on, and I trust that he will be honest with us if he can't handle it."

Trick nods, "Okay, in that case, as I said, Jensen and Luc will go in as the Janitors and get the information we need. If at any point, Jensen feels like it's gotten too much, I will send in Atlas, who will be in the surveillance van with Cash as backup."

"Understood," Jensen replies. "I'm not going to risk a member of our family if I'm really not up to it."

"Good."

"How long is it going to take us to get into the various locations?" Cash asks.

"Around two hours for the house and nearly three for the office building," Trick replies as he looks over the information that Pete sent.

I don't know where he's found the information because I didn't see it unless he knows just from the locations listed.

"Fairly close by then," Atlas points out.

Trick nods, "Mr. R figured that we'd prefer closer cases while we're still

working on the Hunt case, less time traveling and all of that shit.”

“That makes sense,” I reply. “Just out of curiosity, is he planning on giving us easier cases while we’re working the Hunt case?”

“I think that’s the idea, yes. Unless we ask him for a more complicated one, and then that’s what he’ll give us. Mostly because we could get a lead for the Hunt case at any moment, and it could be time-sensitive, which means we need cases that won’t take very long to solve, and that means simple cases.”

“I can deal with that,” Riot smiles. “It might be nice to have some less complicated ones for a while.”

“That’s true, we have had a string of very intense ones,” Rage replies, “it’s almost like a mini break.”

“Alright, so we’ll gear up and leave mid-afternoon then?” Trick asks, making sure everyone agrees.

“Yes,” we all say together.

“It’s settled.” Trick smiles.

Chapter Nine

The next day is spent mostly organising and going over the plan in more detail. This case may be less complicated than most of the ones that we deal with, but it still needs to be executed perfectly. There are many people's lives on the line, and if we've been brought in, then the case is a serious one. It's just not complicated like the cases that we usually get given.

I also appreciate that Mr R is giving us the more straightforward cases while we're working on the Hunt case because it means that when a lead turns up, we can get to it a lot quicker.

I've just finished pulling on my ass kicking boots, which are also flexible enough that if we have to, I can climb up the outside of the building when my phone pings. I haven't heard from Jynx since she went home, so I'm hoping that it's her, which also reminds me that I need to drag Ace up here for some proper food in the next couple of days. I know Jensen has messaged him a couple of times, but I'd feel better if I saw him in person and knew that he wasn't going down the rabbit hole and forgetting to look after himself.

Finally checking my phone, my heart leaps into my throat as I see who the message is from.

Lyric: Hi bestie, I miss you. We're still sorting through stuff, but I wanted you to know that we're all okay. I know I'd be worrying like crazy if I were in your position. Love you.

Ever: I was going out of my mind worrying about you. I'm glad you're okay, and I love you and miss you. Let me know if you need anything at all.

Well, at least that's lessened my worry to a certain extent. Of course, I'm still worrying about her. She didn't really tell me anything like how he was taking it, if she was handling the situation well, nothing like that. Still, at least I've heard from her now because I was considering going down there just to double-check, but I didn't want to intrude either, so I decided against it.

It has been really weird not having her and the guys around. I mean, they're usually nearly always here, or we're always there, and they haven't

been for a while now. I miss them all, and I hope that, for all of their sakes, they can sort it out with Quinn because not only do I know that they missed him like crazy and Lyric loved him as much as her other men, but just from the brief moment that I met Quinn, it was clear that he loves them all just as much.

As I expected, she doesn't reply again, but that's okay, especially now that I know that she's okay. Or at least as okay as she can be considering the circumstances.

I quickly finish getting all of my work stuff ready to go and then head downstairs to meet the guys and fill them in.

"Lyric messaged me," I say as soon as my feet hit the bottom step.

"The guys text us too," Jensen replies and then frowns, "we didn't really get any information out of them, but at least we know they're okay."

"Yeah. Lyric was the same," I reply.

"Alright, has everyone got what they need?" Trick asks us.

"Yeah." I reply and then add, "I want kisses from everyone not coming with me."

My demand is met by grins as Atlas suddenly scoops me up, my legs going around his waist, and his lips slam against mine. His kiss is brief but intense, and I soon find myself passed into Luc's arms. He sets me on my feet as Jensen moves up behind me, his lips caressing my neck as Luc's hand moves to my face, his fingers gently stroking my cheek as his lips meet mine in a kiss that starts off as soft but quickly changes into something deeper as his tongue tangles with mine and Jensen nips my neck. Before long, I'm turned around in Luc's arms as his lips replace Jensen's.

Jensen's kiss is rougher than the other two, and it creates an entirely different feeling of desire in me. As always, I almost get carried away when kissing him. It almost becomes like a competition between us, like a fight, I'm not really sure how to explain it, but that's the best way I can. Neither of us wants to yield, and that tends to end up with us naked.

A tug on my hand tears me away from Jensen and Luc, who both make sounds of displeasure, and I catch Cash's smirk before he pulls me close, his hands grabbing my ass as he kisses me thoroughly. Just as I'm beginning to think fuck it, we've got time to fuck and suggest it; I'm once again pulled away and pulled into Rage's arms this time.

It's not until I step back feeling slightly dazed and incredibly turned on, thanks to all of the kisses, that I realise something.

Narrowing my eyes at a smirking Rage, I accuse, “You’re coming with me.”

The guys burst out laughing as Rage shrugs and replies, “I know, but it’s hot watching you kiss them, and I couldn’t help myself.”

I can’t repress my smile at his words, and he winks at me.

“Alright, let’s go. Keep in contact, stay safe, and play it smart,” Trick orders before looking at Jensen and adding, “Do not push it too far.”

“I won’t boss,” Jensen replies.

We finally pull into a layby near the house that we’re breaking into. The houses out here are spread far apart, but this is still a reasonably busy road, so seeing a van parked opposite the entrance to one of the houses isn’t going to raise any flags. It’s not perfect. Ideally, Trick would like the van closer, but it’s as good as it’s going to get. He’s still going to be able to monitor us reasonably well, at least as well as he could at Hunt’s estate. Better, in fact, because he’s closer and can actually see the gate, which means he can tell us if anyone approaches it or if our perpetrator comes home earlier than we expect him to. We also have the earpieces and bodycams on like usual.

“Alright, stick to the plan, find the information in his office, with his home laptop, copy the files, and take any pictures of hard copies that you can while the others keep watch. Ensure that everything is exactly as you left it so that he doesn’t get suspicious and then out as quickly as possible.” Trick reminds us.

I nod in agreement as I pull on some thin black gloves so that I don’t leave any fingerprints behind, and the others do the same. We do one last check that we have all of our equipment with us and then head for the gates. They look secure apart from the fact that instead of a wall on either side of them, there are bushes and trees. This means that we can actually walk straight through, with a bit of wiggling, and not even bother with going through the gate and potentially triggering the alarms.

We know from Pete’s research that there are no cameras on the edges of the property or on the outside of the house. There are a couple on the inside,

but they're all accessed by a control panel by the front door, and Pete gave us some sort of code in his email that should temporarily glitch the cameras out and provide us with time to do what we need to do. Not a lot of time, but enough. Apparently, the system that he has installed is known for glitching regularly, so he won't be suspicious if he decides to check the feeds.

The house is big and imposing from the outside, and it looks quite blank, you know like it's a show home or not actually lived in. I pull out a lockpicking kit when I get to the door because it was decided that out of Rage, Rafe and Riot, I was the best and, more importantly, the quickest at it. Thankfully, that's proven true when I manage to get us in pretty quickly. Rafe goes to the panel immediately inside of the door and types in the alarm code that Pete also managed to find, and I have no idea how because surely that wasn't easy to find.

While he does that, Rage moves further into the giant foyer and finds a second panel where he types the code for the cameras to make the glitch. We don't waste time talking, having studied the map of the house, and weave our way through the vast hallways, and I can't help but notice that the inside is just as bare and blank as the outside. There's no personality anywhere.

It takes longer than it usually would to get to his office purely thanks to the fact that the house is enormous, but once we're there we quickly get to work, and I say a quick prayer that everything goes smoothly.

Trick

I don't know how much longer I can do this. Staying back while my team and my family go into dangerous situations without me is like a form of torture. Admittedly, this job isn't too bad; there's not too much danger, it's relatively straightforward, and if the guy does come back early, he's going to be outnumbered and outgunned too. We've got just over three weeks left of this, Cash and I, and I know that it's driving him as crazy as it's driving me. Who knows when we're going to catch up with Hunt, but I really hope for the first time ever that it takes us a few weeks, so that I can be involved, although even then, my leg will need strengthening again, so I still most likely won't be able to help as well as I like.

At least if I'm not having to use crutches, I can still be back up if they need me, even that would make me feel better than I do right now.

My eyes are glued to the screens, watching all of their bodycams even though they have no plans of splitting up. I just can't risk something happening, and at least if I watch all of them, I get a lot of different angles, which means that I may spot something that they don't. I'm also listening intently through the earpieces, even though they're staying quiet. When they get to the office, there's a single desk lamp already on, and as Riot moves over to the safe that's not even trying to hide in the corner of the room to break into it, I watch as the others spread out through the room looking through it thoroughly so that we don't miss anything, and Ever goes over to his laptop, pulling out her phone and mostly likely reading over the email instructions that Pete sent on how to copy the entire hard drive without leaving a trace.

From what I remember, she's literally just got to plug it in. Pete's put the program on the USB and modified it, so that's all she needs to do, but I understand why she wants to double-check that she's doing the right thing. This is too important to get wrong, especially since we can't check until it's out of the building, and we can look at the information on one of our secured laptops, which is not actually a part of our brief, so it isn't something that we will do.

That means that we won't know if the laptop really has all of the information that the witness claimed it did until the local law enforcement has gone through it, and that could take a while, especially since they want to build an ironclad case against this fucker so that he never sees the light of day again.

I have to say that watching them work like this, I see things that I normally wouldn't, like how they each check in on Ever at regular intervals, making sure that she's okay and doesn't need help. I do that too, so that doesn't surprise me. It is slightly surprising to see that Ever does the same, just a quick glance at them all every now and then, often coupled with a small smile. It makes me so incredibly happy. My heart lifts, and I feel my lips stretching into a smile. It's a small window into who we are and how much we love each other, and I decide then and there that finding those small moments while I'm stuck in the surveillance van is what is going to ensure that I do not go insane because I could watch these moments forever and not get bored.

It also shows me that they work incredibly well together; they still haven't said a single word, and yet, just from looks or short gestures or even just pure instincts are all they need to make sure that everyone knows where they need to be. They're in and out of the office with all of the evidence that we need within minutes and are rapidly making their way back to the house. I double-check their cameras as they move and the gate. There's still no sign of the perp, and actually, this stretch of road has been incredibly quiet since I've been here; I think only one car went past, and that was a cab, not a resident.

I watch as they reset everything and walk back out of the door before Ever drops and locks the door again, leaving absolutely no sign that they were there. It's good for me to see how they work and if I need to get them to work on anything to make them more cohesive. After seeing how they work and how quickly they have achieved their goal, I know that there aren't any improvements I can make, at least not to this half of my family.

I'm pulled out of my thoughts as the guys get to the van and start to climb in, Ever immediately skips over to where I'm sitting still in front of the monitors still and wraps her arms around my neck from behind, peppering kisses all up my neck and over the side of my face.

"I missed you," she mutters quietly as Rage moves to the driving seat and starts up the van.

We don't want to stay around for any longer than we have to. That's an unnecessary risk that we just don't want to take.

Reaching my hand up so I can hold her to me for a bit longer, my smile is broad as I reply, "I missed you too. It's interesting watching you guys work when I'm not extremely fearful for your lives."

"I bet it is," Riot replies.

"Kind of like watching the TV, but you know the characters," Rafe replies and then adds, "I bet you see things that we don't."

He always has been incredibly intuitive. I turn around, pulling Ever around me as I turn and encouraging her to sit on my lap, which she does with minor hesitation, still worried about hurting me. I understand, but honestly, it's more of an ache now, and I'm being so careful about not doing too much that it never gets to the point where it's really painful, and I'm only really taking painkillers at night, because by the time that I've been on it all day and shifting around, I do need them, especially to help me sleep.

"Yeah, I do," I finally reply to Rafe.

"So, what now?" Rage asks from the front as we pull away from the long

line of rich people's houses.

I clear my throat, “Well, we need to head to Mr R at headquarters so that we can give him the USB and any photographs that you guys took, and we need to wait for Cash and the others to check in and let us know that they’re heading there as well.”

“I imagine it may take them a little bit longer than it did us. It’s slightly more complicated,” Ever points out.

“Yeah, it is. Cash is due to check in with me soon though, just to let me know that everything is going okay, and how it's progressing,” I reply.

“Great. A nice simple and straightforward job for a change,” she smiles and then frowns slightly, “at least it was for us. Let's hope that the others are doing just as well.”

Jensen

It is so fucking good to get back out into the field, but I’m surprised to find out that I’m actually nervous.

“Are you okay?” Luc asks as he pushes a mop and bucket, and I push a cleaning cart along. I glance at him and he raises his eyebrow at my lack of answer and adds, “You’re quieter than usual. You’re usually more bouncy on jobs.”

I sigh, there’s no point lying to him, it's not going to achieve anything, and he’d still know there was something wrong and insist on being told. It’s just easier to tell him what he wants to know.

“I’m nervous,” I admit, slightly unwillingly.

“About reinjuring yourself?” he asks carefully.

I shake my head, “No, I’m as confident as I can be that I can handle this; it’s more that I’m worried about letting everyone down or putting you in danger.”

“Do you really think I would have let you come if I thought in any way that you would put yourself or me in any danger?” he asks me.

I glance at him, studying his expression to make sure that he’s not just telling me what I want to hear, “No, I guess not.”

Chapter Ten

Jensen

“You guess?” he asks me, “Do you know our girlfriend? She’d fucking kill me if I knowingly let something happen to either of us.”

“He’s right,” Atlas says in my ear and I smile.

“Thanks guys,” I reply.

“You’re welcome. Now, let’s do this,” I reply, as we head toward the stairwell that will take us all the way up to the perps office.

The help isn’t allowed to use the elevator; we found that out when we tried a few minutes ago, and an employee who was leaving late decided to curse us out and tell us exactly what he thought of us. I hate people like that, people that believe that because they’ve got more money than someone, it means they’re better, and they can treat everyone else like they’re second-class citizens and like they are worth less than shit on their shoes.

I bet the guy would have a fucking coronary if he realised that individually Luc and I could pay his wage for the next ten years and not even make a dent thanks to the way that I have invested my money and the others too.

I admit that I feel a lot better now that I’ve told the guys what I’m feeling, and they’ve point-blank refused to let me wallow or become fearful. I think that’s the danger here; no matter how much I want to get back in the game, I also don’t want to come back too soon and become a liability. If one of my family members gets hurt because I can’t protect their backs like I usually would, I would never forgive myself.

Even though I know that they would without hesitation.

Having said all of that, as we move up the stairs to the correct floor, which is, of course, at the top of the building, I find that I’m actually not struggling, and even before the event, as I’ve taken to calling it, I would have been bitching and moaning and out of breath.

“Looks like that cardio is paying off, huh?” Luc smirks, knowing full well that he’s been preaching the benefits of damn cardio for years, and I have

outright refused to listen to him.

“Maybe,” I reply with a smirk, and when I hear chuckles coming through the earpieces, I add, “yeah, okay. You were right, and yes, I am finding this surprisingly easy.”

“I thought so. Admit it, you actually enjoy running, don’t you?” he practically gloats.

“Maybe,” I repeat, this time not admitting that yeah, actually I do, and I’m really looking forward to when the snow clears completely and I can start going running on our land.

Thankfully, he doesn’t push any further as we get to the right floor and push through the door and into a much more lavishly decorated area than downstairs, not that I’m surprised because this is pretty much the norm when it comes to businesses like this.

No one is working late, which is surprising, although we are here at midnight.

“Which door was it again?” I ask.

“Right at the end of the hallway,” Luc replies, as both of us keep our heads angled downwards to avoid any of the cameras just in case.

We don’t have Pete to create a loop for us, so we can just get in and out, and he couldn’t give us a code like he gave the others because the security network here is too vast. This means that we actually have to be a bit more careful of the camera placement, which, thankfully, he was able to find for us. It also means that we actually have to clean, which I’m less than enthusiastic about.

There was a list of exactly what needed to be cleaned pinned inside this tiny room in the basement that contained all the cleaning supplies and also apparently the break room for them as well. Knowing that the office is the last room that we need to clean, Luc and I get to work with cleaning the hallway and the other offices up here. The good news is that there are only four other offices up in the considerable space and although they’re big, they are pretty much spotless already.

It doesn’t take us too long, and we’re soon heading into the main office. Luc goes over to the laptop that’s set up and plugs in the USB before typing in the code that Pete gave us in the email. The orders were to focus on the laptop at the office because the safe here is more state of the art than the one at his home. This means that we couldn’t get into it without explosives, and although I was all for the explosives, the others weren’t. So it was decided

that we would just search the office for any papers that were left out and hope that the information on both laptops and whatever the other team has managed to find in the house is enough to ensure that he goes away for a long time.

If not, then we'll sort that out too, and I'm sure there will be another plan that's already in place if we don't get the information that the local law enforcement are hoping for. I do take a quick look at the safe just in case it's similar to any of the ones that I'm familiar with; it's not, but it was worth checking out just in case. The USB won't take very long to do its thing, but since we want the guy to remain as far in the dark as possible for as long as possible, we still need to clean in here and keep it looking as normal as possible.

Thankfully it doesn't take too much longer to do since his office is already pretty fucking clean, and then we grab the USB stick and head back down all of the stairs to the little closet to put the cleaning supplies away and then down the street to the van.

"How's everything looking?" I ask as soon as we get in, "How did it go with the others? Have they checked in yet?"

Atlas pulls a face, "Boring. I'm not a fan of staying in the surveillance van."

Cash smirks, "You never are when it's your turn to sit in the van."

"That's true. I can't help it though. Even though this case was really straightforward, I still would've liked to be in there as well; it would've been better than staying in here."

"Dude, imagine how Jensen, Trick, and I feel?" Cash asks, "We've been stuck doing this for the last couple of cases, and Trick and I are going to be stuck doing this for the next few weeks still."

Atlas's expression immediately looks sheepish, "Oh shit. Sorry guys, that was really insensitive of me."

I chuckle, "Don't worry about it, man. We all know how you feel about surveillance. It's not a new revelation to us, and it's not like you were deliberately trying to be a dick."

"Yeah dude," Luc smirks, "It's just in your nature."

"Asshole," Atlas retorts, sticking up his middle finger although there's amusement in his eyes.

"Right, let's get out of here before this devolves further, and we end up getting the cops called on us because you fuckers are fighting," Cash grins.

Atlas smirks as he starts the van, and we pull away, “We’re heading to headquarters to hand in the USB, right?”

“Yeah,” Cash replies, and then turns to me, finally answering my question, “I called Trick while you guys were still in there. They finished before us, and it was as straightforward for them as it was for us. They’re already on the way to Headquarters, and they’ll meet us there so we can swap the vans back for the cars.”

“Great,” I reply, feeling relieved even though I knew that the chances of them being in trouble were pretty slim with this job. You never really know.

Thankfully, the drive to headquarters is spent keeping each other amused, so it doesn’t seem like its been that long of a drive, and once we’ve handed the USB in and double-checked that we’re all okay, we get into our cars and head home, I manage to snag Ever at the last moment so that she ends up in the car with me and I get snuggles for the drive home.

Ever

“Have I mentioned that I hate writing reports?” I announce to the room as a whole as I stare down at my laptop. This report should be really easy to write. I mean, nothing happened, but in a way, that makes it even worse. At least if something exciting happened, there would be something exciting to write.

“Yes, you have repeatedly,” Trick replies, raising his eyebrow at me.

I don’t really have a reply for that, so I just stick my tongue out at him because I know it winds him up on several levels, and it feels like the most appropriate response.

When I’m finally done, I check the time and realise that it’s nearly dinner time, which I should have guessed considering the wonderful smells wafting from the kitchen. I send the report over to Trick, who smiles at me and then abandon my laptop on the table as I walk into the kitchen and wrap my arms around Rafe.

“That smells delicious, as always,” I tell him and then add, “Is there

enough for me to invite Pete and Ace up? I haven't heard from Ace for a day or so, which means he's fully stuck in deconstructing the bomb."

"Yeah, I've definitely made enough. I always tend to make extras just in case." He replies with a smile.

"Great, thank you," I reply and give him a kiss.

"If Ace really is that deep into his project, it might be a better idea if I go and grab him," Jensen suggests, walking into the room and clearly having heard our conversation.

I nod, "Yeah, good idea. He's probably either lost his phone or just won't answer it. It will probably be better if you dragged him up here."

"I'll go now so that we can be back in time for food. It's going to take me a while to convince him to come up here, I imagine," Jensen replies, walking closer to me so that he can kiss me and then leaving the room to go and get a most likely uncooperative Ace.

"I'll text Pete now as well. If he doesn't reply, I'll go and grab him," I say to Rafe as I pull out my phone and do it before I add, "Do you know when Elijah and the guys are back?"

Rafe shakes his head, "No, I have no idea, but ask Trick he'll know."

"Good point," I reply, and press send as I walk back into the extension, "Trick, when is Elijah and the guys back?"

Trick looks up from his laptop as those who chose to write down here just ignore me so that they can get their reports finished, "Tomorrow morning, they're on the way back now, but they won't get back until tomorrow."

"Oh, great. So everything went well then?" I ask.

"Yeah, I don't think there were any complications. They didn't mention any, at least, and they've already sent their reports through; well, Elijah and Marty have Creed, and Noel always takes a bit longer."

"Good. That reminds me, actually, I promised Noel that I'd get him up for movies and talk about all things Marty. Don't let me forget I need to do that when we have a break."

"Got it, Sweetheart," he replies with a smile and then goes back to typing away.

"Hi, my gorgeous bestie, it's been a while," Pete greets as Shadow runs around the room and greets everyone.

I spin around and pull him into a tight hug. I honestly didn't realise how much I'd missed him until this moment, "Dude, I do not like it when you leave me like that. I know you're doing important work, blah blah blah, but

Jynx went home Lyric's awol, and I missed you."

He chuckles, his eyes light up with happiness, "I missed you too."

"Good," I mutter and then add, "Ace is coming up too. Jensen is going to drag him away from his project now."

"Good luck," Pete replies, "he's worse than I am when it comes to projects. I doubt he'll even hear that there's someone at the door."

"That's why Jensen is going. He'll get in regardless of whether the door is locked or not, and he'll bug Ace until he comes up for a proper meal, which I doubt that he's had if he's that absorbed in what he's doing," I point out with a smile.

"That's smart," Pete replies, "speaking of missing besties, did you get a message from Lyric?"

I nod as we sit down at the table, completely absorbed in our conversation and ignoring the others, "Yeah, she just said that she had a lot to go through still but wanted to let me know she was okay. That was pretty much it."

Pete nods, "Yeah, that's the same thing she sent me. Frustratingly vague, although I understand why. There's probably far too much to write in a text message, and she's probably decided to just tell us what she can in person when she finally does reappear. I mean, we're worrying, but they could just be having loads of sex to make up for lost time."

I burst out laughing, "Peter!" I exclaim and then add, "Yeah, actually you might be right. I just want things to go back to normal, and I'm incredibly curious about Quinn."

"Me too," Pete admits.

"Not to mention he hasn't been debriefed about his time with Hunt, and we need some questions answered. Mr R has given him a lot of leeway, purely because he's not actually employed by the organisation and he's a childhood friend, not to mention the fact everyone thought he was dead," Rage adds, joining the conversation.

"Do you know, that hadn't even occurred to me, and it should've. I was just too focused on the whole he's alive, Lyric's got her whole family back together thing, but he was with Hunt for a while, and he might have some light to shed on all of this." I reply thoughtfully.

"You're right," Trick replies, "I know Mr R is getting slightly impatient now, and I don't know how much more time he's going to give them before he insists on having a word with Quinn or even a report."

"Knowing Quinn, he's most likely already written the report or is working

on it. He likes to be organised, and he'll know that Mr R needs it," Atlas adds.

I sometimes forget that, actually, Rage and Atty knew Quinn for quite a while before all of this. Although, from what I understand, he was quite standoffish with them all back then, which is probably why Quinn kept looking at Atlas with surprise when we got him out and away from Hunt.

"Well, let's hope so. We need all the help we can get when it comes to Hunt. Especially now that it seems he's taken a personal interest in us," Pete replies.

"Yeah, that is concerning." I frown, my eyebrows dipping together with concern.

"We'll get him. We've got the best and most strategic minds in the country working on catching him, and hopefully, Quinn will be able to share with us some other insights that might be able to help," Riot says, trying to reassure me.

"Don't forget Rylie," Luc adds, "we know that she is damn good at her job, and if anyone can find a lead, it's going to be her."

"Yeah, she's something else for sure," I reply.

I hear the front door slam, and in walks a grumpy-looking Ace who also looks incredibly dishevelled, "I do not know why I had to come."

"Oh, so you not only look like you've stopped taking care of yourself, but you are also hangry," I accuse, standing up and giving him a look.

Ace waves his hand dismissively, "Dude, I'm fine."

I nod, "Alright, if you're so fine, let me send a picture of you in your current state to Jynx, and we'll see what she has to say, shall we?"

His eyes widen as he looks down over his clothes, his shirt having something smeared on it, and everything crinkled. "Alright, no need for threats."

"I fucking told you, dude," Jensen smirks. "Go and use the shower in my room. You know where all my stuff is; help yourself and, for god sake, bin those clothes."

"He's right. You're never going to be able to get the stains out of that shirt," I reply.

Ace frowns, "Thanks, guys. Don't eat without me."

"We won't," I tell him.

"You've got twenty minutes, and then everything will be ready," Rafe calls after him, and I chuckle when he speeds up and starts running to get up the

stairs.

“I know Jynx said he could get bad when he’s in the zone, but jeez,” Trick mutters.

“Yeah, I feel bad. I should have gone and checked on him before,” I frown.

“It’s not your fault. You said he was still replying. He’s okay. He just needs a shower and something proper to eat,” Atlas reassures me.

“Dude threatened to blow me up if I didn’t leave him alone,” Jensen replies, looking more amused than anything else as he adds, “Fortunately, I had a couple of knives on me, and it turns out I’m quicker than he is.”

We all gape at him. I can not have heard that right.

Luc sighs heavily as he pinches his nose and then asks, “Neither of you is bleeding, right?”

“Not badly,” Jensen grins proudly, that spark that has been dimmed over the last few weeks lighting back up.

It makes me happy to see him happy and I can’t help the smile that stretches across my face.

“Do either of you need stitches?” Luc asks, his eyebrow raised. While he looks somewhat exasperated, the rest of us just look incredibly amused because it is pretty funny.

Chapter Eleven

Not many best friends can say that they are still best friends after one of them threatened to blow the other one up, so he threw a knife at him.

Jensen shrugs, “I don’t, and I’m sure he would’ve said something if I got him too badly, although he was being a little bitch on the drive up here, so he smeared blood on pretty much everything he could in the car.”

“Dude, you stabbed me,” Ace accuses, coming back into the room and looking loads better.

“I did not stab you. I gave you plenty of warning and threw a knife at you. It is not my fault that you didn’t move quickly enough when we both know that you would be able to normally,” Jensen retorts, his arms crossed over his chest.

You can see the warped logic make sense in Ace’s mind, but he still repeats, “You threw a knife at me!”

“And you threatened to blow me up,” Jensen retorts.

“I did?” Ace asks, looking slightly sheepish now.

“Yep,” Jensen replies with an amused smile. He must be one of the only people who would find it amusing when someone threatens their life.

Ace scrubs a hand across the back of his neck, “Shit, sorry man.”

“No worries.” Jensen shrugs.

“I guess we’re even then,” Ace smirks.

“Definitely,” Jensen chuckles as we head into the kitchen to help Rafe bring out the food.

“Ace, you didn’t answer me. Do you need stitches?” Luc asks again.

“Oh, sorry, dude, I’ve just realised how hungry I am, so that’s pretty much all I can think about right now.” We all watch curiously as Ace lifts the arm of his shirt and turns to show Luc.

Luc moves closer so he can get a better look and then sighs, “Yeah, you need a couple of stitches. I can do it, so it shouldn’t ruin the line of your tattoo when it’s healed.”

Ace’s eyebrows raise slightly as he looks impressed, “Really? That would

be awesome if you could. Don't worry if not though. Quite a few of my tattoos aren't as straight as they used to be; it wouldn't really matter."

"I've got you, man. I'll do my best," Luc smiles, "go and sit down and eat, and I'll get my kit. I'm assuming you want to eat first?"

Ace shrugs as he goes to take a seat, "Just stitch me up while I'm eating. It wouldn't be the first time and definitely won't be the last either."

"Alright, man." Luc smiles as he leaves the room.

Everyone is quiet, enjoying their food while Ace gets stitched up, seemingly entirely unfazed by the whole situation when Trick asks Pete, "How're you getting on with the handheld device?"

Pete grins, "I'm so close. Just a couple more tweaks, and I think I have it."

"That's great, man," Cash tells him, shoveling more food into his mouth.

"Yeah, we're pretty pleased. I've really enjoyed it too. It's been nice to do something different, and it's been so long since I've really flexed that side of my brain that I have to admit I was slightly worried that I wouldn't be able to do it."

I share a look with Trick, it's obvious to see that he's really enjoying it, and it makes me say, "You know, if you wanted to be more involved in that side of things and do fewer jobs out in the field with us, that would be okay?"

Pete smiles, "I have been thinking about maybe being in the tech lab a bit more often. They've got some really interesting projects coming up, and I'd love to be involved with them. But I don't think I want to say yes; I'm going to take a step back, and that be it. I think I would like it to be a little bit more free-flowing than that. So, for example, I'd like to work more with them over the next couple of projects, but then I still want to come out on jobs with you, and I definitely want to be involved with the whole Hunt thing. Am I making any sense?"

Riot chuckles, "Yeah, we get you, man, don't worry."

Trick smiles, "Yeah, as Riot said, I get it. I tell you what, why don't we just ask before we do any job and see which one that you'd like to do? The decision is completely up to you. If you're stuck in a project, say no. If you want a bit more shooting and that sort of thing, say yes?"

Pete's eyes light up with a smile, "Yes, except you guys are always my top priority, so if you need me on a job, then pull me from whatever I'm doing."

"Understood," Trick agrees.

"Thanks," Pete replies.

Atlas smiles, “Dude, why are you thanking us? You need to do what makes you happy. To be completely honest, I’m waiting for the day when some of the others want to step back and do this part-time.”

I tilt my head to the side, surprised that he’s had a similar thought to the ones that I have had over the years.

“Really?” Pete asks, sounding interested.

Before Atlas can reply, I do, “Rafe especially. We all know how much he loves to cook, and if he really wanted to, he could own a restaurant and share his amazing food with everyone.”

Rafe’s eyes widen slightly with surprise, “You know, I actually hadn’t thought about it properly. I don’t think I’d ever want to be completely out of this life. For one, I couldn’t send you guys into dangerous situations and not be there too, but also, I fucking love what we do. A restaurant of my own is an interesting idea, though.”

We all smile; he would rock it if he genuinely wanted to go down the restaurant route, and he could quite easily. Not only does he have the skills, but he has the money to back him up, and with Jensen’s business knowledge, he could be really successful. I imagine that once word got out, people would start coming from far and wide to eat his food. I also get what he’s saying about loving what we do. We all have that violence in us that almost needs the job that we have. Also, I know that Rafe especially loves helping people, and just like we always have done, the people that we get off the street now are the biggest bads out there, and we save a lot of people by just taking that one person down.

Trick raises his eyebrow slightly as he leans back in his chair, “Alright, I didn’t think this needed to be said, but I was clearly wrong. If any of you want to explore other avenues, other passions, whether that is part-time or full-time, where you stop going on jobs entirely, then you have my support one hundred percent, as I’m sure you will have everyone else’s. We can easily work on ways to make it work with everything else that goes on.”

“I don’t think any of us have even considered it,” I say, knowing that I considered it for Rafe but not myself, and that’s for the simple fact that I don’t want to do anything else, this is me, this is who I am, and this is who I want to be and what I want to do for the rest of life.

Looking around at the others, I’m pretty confident that the majority of them feel the same way I do. Whether that always stays the same or changes as we all get older and change as people is something that I can’t predict, but

I think it's definitely important that everyone knows that just because we don't all still do this job together doesn't mean that anything else changes and that we have that option.

"We had the same discussion," Ace says, as everyone thinks about the revelation, and he helps himself to what must be thirds.

"Yeah, how did it go?" Jensen asks.

Ace shrugs, "Much like it did for you, it wasn't something that we considered, and so far none of us have decided to take a step back although, I think Mason might eventually go more into research or something along those lines. It's slightly different for us because we aren't on the right side of the law."

"Yeah, that definitely makes things a bit more complicated, but I guess if you ever did want to go legitimate, you could always join us and work for Mr R. I don't think there's much chance that he would refuse you." Rage replies.

Ace nods, "I will admit that it's something that we have thought about, but we love what we're doing and the extended family that we have found in the Ravens. I think it will be a very long time before we do that, and even then it's a long shot."

"That makes sense. I know Jynx loves being on the darker side of things," I reply.

"Changing the subject," Trick interrupts, "Ace, did you get any further with identifying the designer of the bomb?"

Ace sighs heavily, "No, is the short answer. It's designed so well, better than I have seen for a while. I don't recognise any of the design components or the signature that's on it. I am eighty percent confident that the designer is the same as the one who designed the bomb in the warehouse; even though I didn't get to look at it for very long, there are a couple of outside design components that are unique to this designer."

"Wow, okay, so an unknown designer then, and a damn good one too," Atlas frowns.

"It certainly makes things more interesting," Luc adds.

"Have you got a picture of the signature used?" Peter asks, "I can compare it to the one that we found on the bugs and see if they're the same."

Ace's eyes light up, "I hadn't thought of doing that. That's a great idea. One second."

Peter looks over the picture on Ace's phone thoroughly before he looks disappointed and says what we've already guessed, "It's not the same. I was

hoping it would be since we can't find a similar one anywhere.”

“You can't?” Jensen asks.

Peter shakes his head, “No, the guys have been looking for it since we first found the bugs, but they can't find it, and the organisation has the most extensive database that I've seen.”

Ace nods, “I've got my feelers out with some people I know who are experts in the field of all things explosive, but no one has come back with anything yet.”

“So, that all points to Hunt having some unknown and very skilled people working for him,” Cash says.

I frown. That's really not a good thing, and in fact that's incredibly dangerous because we have no idea what they're capable of, and if what they've done so far is anything to go by, they are extremely talented. We have no way of knowing what else they've made for Hunt.

“We need to identify them as quickly as possible,” Trick replies.

“There are a lot of things that we need to do to ensure that we catch Hunt, and his power and reach is going to make that damn difficult,” Rafe replies.

We all murmur in agreement before we fall quiet, each of us lost in our own thoughts and trying to come up with solutions, at least I am. Hunt poses a severe threat to a lot of people, possibly to the country's security, and we need him out of the way.

For the rest of the evening, we stop talking about work and instead switch to lighter topics.

When Pete and Ace finally go home, they both look a lot more relaxed, and I make them both promise that they will go straight to bed and work again in the morning. I have no idea if they'll listen because I know me, and I know that when I'm really focused on the intricacies of a case, I can get similar to those two and not want to stop until I've figured it out, although I have to admit that I'm not quite as bad as they are.

I'm just getting ready to head up to see the horses when my phone pings with a text message from Noel.

Noel: Can I come up? Something happened, and I want your advice.

Me: Of course you can. How long are you going to be?

Noel: Er, I'm outside. I couldn't wait and just hoped that you were going to say yes.

I burst out laughing, earning some questioning looks from Rafe and Jensen, who are the only ones in the room with me. I don't know where anyone else is, although I do know that Atlas is talking to Alaric for an update and to make some suggestions of people that used to be contacts to see if they know anything about Liam's whereabouts and even if he's alive or not.

Before I can get to the front door, it opens, and a slightly sheepish-looking Noel walks in.

"Whoops," he shrugs.

I grin as I pull him in for a hug, "You know you're always welcome up here."

"I know, but I still feel like I need to let you know before I actually turn up. I mean, you've got a lot of gorgeous men surrounding you. If I were you, I'd be busy all the time," the way he wriggles his eyebrows suggestively has me laughing again.

"Good point," I reply with a smirk and wink of my own before I add, "but you sounded like you needed to talk, and I'm not going to make you wait."

"This is why I love you," Noel chuckles as we walk into the kitchen, and he immediately starts raiding the fridge for leftovers.

"Hey man, I didn't expect to see you today. Haven't you just gotten back from a job?" Jensen asks him.

Noel nods around a mouthful of god knows what, "Yeah, I've come to steal your girlfriend for a bit though. I need some advice."

"Fair enough," Jensen shrugs and then opens his arms for me, "Come and give me a cuddle then. I'm guessing from the way that he's on edge it might be a long chat, so I want my kiss now too."

"I thought I was hiding it quite well," Noel replies, sounding quite indignant that Jensen has picked up on it.

Jensen shrugs, "You did."

He doesn't bother explaining further or anything as he kisses me deeply, and I forget everything and everyone for a few minutes.

"I'm never going to get tired of that," I sigh.

"My turn," Rafe mutters and pulls me into his arms, doing the same.

Once I'm thoroughly kissed and feeling like I'm floating, I turn back to a smiling Noel, who has now moved on to a bag of chips, which he's munching on.

"We'll let you know what Atlas finds out from Alaric if it's anything interesting," Jensen tells me.

"Great, thank you." I reply and then raise my eyebrow at Noel, "What kind of conversation is this? Do you want to talk in my room, or do you want to do something like go for a walk and talk?"

Noel thinks for a second before he replies, "Go for a walk and talk."

"Come on then," I smile as I lead him back through the house, waving at the guys that I come across. I pull my jacket on and my boots, and then we head outside.

Fortunately, most of the snow has melted now, and we shouldn't be getting any more, so we can walk and talk easily enough.

As soon as we're a decent distance from the house, I turn to look at Noel expectantly, "So, what's happened?"

His lips twitch, and I immediately become more intrigued, so it's good news then.

"Marty and I finally had a really long talk about us, and he initiated it," he tells me in a rush.

"No fucking way," I exclaim, "seriously, after what happened on the last job?"

"Yeah, I know it completely threw me, if I'm honest. I wasn't expecting it in the slightest," he replies.

"Well, maybe he needed that threat in order to get his shit together," I reply, slightly unsure of my suggestion. "What did he say?"

"He wants to give us a go, like properly. He wants to take it slow; he's got some issues to work through, which I knew about anyway, and honestly, I think after all of our histories, we need to take it slowly; we need to get to know each other as romantic partners if that makes any sense." Before I can reply, he continues to explain, "Like, we know each other as friends, we know each other as a hook-up and as teammates, but we haven't actually got to know each other as romantic partners like Elijah and Pete are."

"I get that," I reply, "you need to know whether you're compatible as something more than just that."

"Exactly," he replies, chewing his lip nervously.

"Why do you look so nervous? Shouldn't you be happy? This is what

you've wanted for a long time," I ask him, concern lacing my tone as I look away and trudge up the path.

We're doing a loop around the house, which isn't too long and it would be impossible to get lost on, which is what we need because neither of us is particularly paying attention to where we're going. I must admit that I made that mistake a couple of times when I was talking to someone, and we both got so absorbed in the conversation that we actually had no idea where we ended up. Fortunately, at those times, it was summer, so it wasn't too much of a big deal. It would be if we got lost now though, because although it's not snowing, it is still damn cold.

Chapter Twelve

“I’m nervous because what if it doesn’t work?” he asks, “I’ve wanted this for so long, and what if we don’t work as romantic partners?”

I can’t help the confused look that I give him. I know why he wants to make sure that they work romantically, but I honestly thought that for him, it was more of a technicality rather than something that he was unsure of.

“I really don’t think that you have to worry about it not working,” I tell him honestly.

“Really?” he asks, the hope in his voice almost breaking my heart.

I gently pull him to a stop, “Yeah, really. Look, we have all known that you guys have seriously liked each other, probably longer than you have. You guys work, and you’re in a stronger position than most going into a relationship because you were friends first.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he replies, still sounding like he’s not entirely convinced.

I really wish that Pete or Elijah were here because they’d be able to confirm what I’m saying, and maybe together we’d be able to convince him. There’s no point in calling them though because Elijah’s just got back from a job, and they always spend the next day entirely by themselves, a ritual that they’ve come up with together, and I love it.

“Honestly, it will work out, and if it doesn’t, then it wasn’t supposed to,” I tell him, “you know I’m a big believer in whatever will be will be, and everything happens for a reason. For what it’s worth, I really think that you guys will get there. I think you need to be aware that he’s most likely going to freak out again, and you’re going to need to be patient with him if you really truly want to be with him.”

He nods, “I know that I love him. I want to make this work, and I want to help him work through the issues he has. It helps that we’re surrounded by so many supportive people. I mean, it says a lot that he feels comfortable being himself around you guys and not avoiding me.”

“Yeah, obviously, he knows that we’ll support him no matter what. The

only thing that I will not support him with is if he deliberately hurts you. I care about you both so much, but I will not let either of you seriously hurt each other.”

“I get that, and I’d be saying the same to you if our positions were reversed,” Noel replies.

“Good,” I smile, “so when are you going on your first official date?”

He practically starts skipping, as his arms move dramatically as he talks, “Friday, at least, that’s what we’re aiming for. I asked him to let me sort it all out so that I could make it perfect. I’ve actually been thinking about it for a long time, how I’d make it amazing for our first if I ever got the chance to take him on one.”

As he continues to talk about the plans he has for their first date, my phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out just in case it’s one of the guys with an update from Alaric that he’s found something.

Marty: Can I call you later? I’m sure Noel has filled you in by now, and I’m super nervous. I’m super happy, and I’m not going to back out, but I’m definitely more nervous than I thought I would be.

I can’t help but smile as I read the text. I must admit that I was slightly worried that Noel might be getting his hopes up a bit. Marty has some serious trauma surrounding being who he really is. I don’t even know the details, and it’s obvious to me that he does. Noel does know; Marty has shared that with him, and I think that’s a good sign that they’re going to work out so long as Marty’s demons don’t start to drag him under.

Me: Of course you can, and yeah, I’m with him now. You’ve got this, and you can make this work like Pete and Elijah have. Actually, Elijah might be a good one to talk to about it; he was hesitant about getting back into a relationship with Pete. I know it’s different circumstances, but it still might help.

Marty: Yeah, that’s a good idea. I’ll do that. I’ll leave you to talk to Noel, speak soon.

I put my phone away as Noel and I continue walking and talking. I haven’t seen him this light and happy for far too long. Marty has treated him like shit, and I will be pointing that out to him later and making sure that he grovels a bit too, because Noel deserves the world.

“Are you coming in for a bit?” I ask him as we stop outside of the front door.

“Nah, if it’s okay, I’m going to head back to my place. I want to make sure

everything is ready for Friday, and more importantly, I guess I haven't actually written my report for the job yet, and I know Trick is going to be asking for that really soon."

"Yeah, I'll try and hold him off for a bit, but you know what he's like when it comes to the reports. He likes everything to be efficient and on time," I reply, but we both know that Trick will be fine with it. Yes, he likes things a bit more organised and everything on time, but he's not unreasonable.

"Thanks, Ever. I'll get it to him as soon as I can," he replies, as he turns to get in his car, waving at me as he backs up and then pulls down the driveway.

Walking through the front door, I smile at the latest turn of events. I'm so glad that they've finally sorted it out, and I hope for both of their sakes that it works out for them. They deserve to be happy. I do think that they've got their work cut out for them though. They have a lot of history together, and they're going to have to work through that before they can build a proper relationship together.

Lyric is going to be so fucking happy for them when she finds out; it's been driving her crazy the way that they've been behaving around each other. She was talking about making some truth serum, which I had no idea she was capable of doing. Thankfully, her men talked her out of that reasonably easily because they pointed out the moral issues of giving two of her family members truth serums and also the fact that it's up to them if they're ready to talk about it or not and if not then forcing them to talk before they're ready isn't going to help anything and would make it worse.

Lyric responds to logic incredibly well and quickly backed down from that idea, stating that it was just bugging the shit out of her and they'd be really good together.

"What was that all about?" Riot asks as I walk into the front room.

"Do I need to have a word with Marty?" Rage asks, "I know that we all agreed to leave them to sort their own shit out, but I'm getting really fed up with him hurting Noel all the time."

I shake my head, "No, Marty did good this time, and trust me, I'm going to bring up his treatment of Noel the next time I talk to him.

I try to reassure them all since they're all in here frowning at me, but at the same time, I do not tell them too much. Noel didn't tell me not to say anything, but at the same time, he didn't tell me I could tell the guys, so it's just safer if I don't say anything at all and let them fill everyone else in when

they're ready to.

"Good, I'm glad he's finally behaving properly. He's gotten really bad recently," Atlas replies.

Apparently, that's all they need from me because they all turn back to the TV and start up the game that several of them are playing. All that walking has made me hungry, but before I can get to the kitchen to raid the cupboards or, better yet the fridge for some of Rafe's leftovers, my phone starts to ring, and I pull it out.

"Guy's, it's Rylie. She might have found something," I warn them so that they can pause the TV in case they have to listen to something that Rylie has to tell us.

"Hey girl," Rylie's voice comes through from the other end of the phone.

I don't know why, but after so many years of not talking and hoping to hear her voice, I'm still not used to hearing it on the other end of the phone, and I think it's going to take me a while until it doesn't shock me.

"Hey, is this a catchup or a work call?" I ask her curiously, happy for either but definitely hoping that it's a good news work call. I'm getting bored.

"Work," she replies.

"Okay, give me one second, and I'll put you on speakerphone so everyone can hear you, and I don't have to repeat what you told and risk forgetting something important."

"No worries," Rylie replies.

After pressing a few buttons and moving closer to the guys, perching on Atlas's lap so that everyone can hear properly and also because I want cuddles, I say, "Alright, Ry, go ahead. What's going on?"

"I've managed to get some intel that says Hunt is going to be at one of the clubs that he owns tonight. It's in the same town as the restaurant we went to, so I thought we'd go and check it out?"

"Great work, well done, Rylie," Trick compliments, and then looks at us, "I don't think it's a good idea that we all go. We make quite an impact when we go to places together, and we don't want to spook Hunt before we get to him. We need to take him in as quickly and quietly as possible."

"I agree," Cash replies with a frown, "even if we all arrived at the club at different intervals, there are still a lot of us, and Hunt could have people on the lookout for us by this point."

"He'd be stupid not to," Riot adds, "we almost caught him once, and he's

goaded us a few times now.”

“Exactly,” Trick replies.

“So, we’re all in agreement then, why don’t we have people set up around the perimeter, hiding in plain sight or just plain hiding? Some in one of the cars that won’t be recognised as government. We’ve got plenty to choose from, and then we can send two of us in and make sure that we’ve got all the exits covered and that they’re both wearing wires so that he can hear everything,” Atlas suggests.

“I like that idea,” Rylie speaks for the first time since we started discussing the plan. “I’ve already done some surveillance of the area and the building. There’s an all-night diner across the street that a couple of people can hunker down in, dark alleys on either side of the building, and a fire escape on one side. There’s a front door, obviously, a door leading out onto the alley on the right side of the building, and the fire escape is on the left. Those are the only exits; there isn’t a basement, and the building is backed onto another row of buildings, so there’s no escape route that way. Although, if you were motivated enough, you could escape via the roof, although that is a bit dodgy.”

All of us have our eyebrows raised at the sheer amount of prep work that she’s done. It’s pretty fucking impressive.

“Okay, that definitely saves us a lot of time, and we can easily spread people out at those locations and have someone on the roof,” Rafe replies when Rylie falls silent.

“Oh, I call roof.” Atty grins.

If given the option, Atlas always goes for the higher position, and I think it has something to do with being a sniper. It’s still his favourite weapon, and he’s only gotten even better at using it over the years. I can guarantee that he will have it up there with him and set up, just in case he needs it. I have to admit that it’s damn reassuring whenever you have Atlas covering your back because he very rarely fucking misses. That’s just how good he is.

I’m pulled out of my thoughts when a piece of paper is handed to me by Trick, and I frown because I’m confused about why he would be giving me a note instead of just talking to me, at least that is until I read the note.

‘Do you want to go in with Rylie? Are you comfortable with that, or shall I have one of the guys go in with you and keep Rylie on the outskirts?’

It’s a good question, and I understand why he’s asked it. We don’t know Rylie anymore, and we also know that she’s not used to working in a team,

which could present its own issues. We need to be cautious, at least for a short amount of time.

‘Yeah, I’ll go in with her. It would be easier to keep an eye on her inside with me than it would be if she were staking out somewhere outside. That would allow her to potentially leave her position and create a weak spot that could allow Hunt to escape or, worse, someone to be put in danger.’

Trick nods and waits until Jensen has finished talking to Rylie and asking her what kind of food the diner serves because if it's good, that's where he wants to be stationed. Jensen has always been good at distracting talk and falls into it seamlessly without being asked.

“Rylie, how would you feel about going in with Ever?” Trick asks.

“Absolutely, I can do that,” Rylie replies without pause.

“Great, so we’ll meet you a couple of streets down and then get into position, and you two can wait in the car until it’s time to go in since we’re going to have to get there long enough to set up,” Trick replies.

“Do you have any idea what sort of time he’s turning?” Luc asks.

“Yeah, around nine-ish. So that should give us enough time to set up, and then Ever and I can head in around eight forty and blend in. What’s the plan for when we spot him?” she asks.

“You two will both have wires on you so that we can hear everything that’s going on, and you can let us know if you need backup,” Trick starts to explain, “If you spot him, I think the best thing to do would be to get him to notice you and then lead him out where we can apprehend him, we want to keep the civilians out of it if possible, and that means that we need to get him out of the building.”

Rylie hums in agreement, “Yeah, that sounds good to me.”

“I would like to remind everyone that he is most likely surrounding himself with bodyguards and highly trained ones as well. We know he only likes surrounding himself with the best.” Jensen reminds us all.

“Absolutely,” I reply in agreement.

We stay on the phone for a bit longer, finalising all of the small details and arranging a time and place for us to meet Rylie. Once that’s all sorted, we say our goodbyes.

“Does it make anyone else feel uneasy that he’s not going to be very far from our hometown and that he wasn’t when he shot Amelia in front of us?” Rafe asks.

“Yeah, I don’t like it in the slightest,” Rage replies with a deep frown.

“The only thing that’s making me feel better about it right now is the fact that if he knew where we lived, surely he would have made a move by now. I know he likes playing games, but he also doesn’t like to lose, and he must know that we’re a serious threat to him,” Luc suggests.

“I really hope you’re right because I don’t like it. It makes me feel uneasy, and I can’t get Ezra to increase the security around the town because they’re still missing in action.” Atlas adds with a deep frown.

“Yeah, it’s like we said the other day though, if they don’t pull out of it soon, we might have to contact them. At least to get Ezra to up the security around town and get the debrief report to Mr R.” Trick suggests not liking the idea, but we don’t really have a choice at this point. They’ve been out of the game for nearly two weeks, and we need them, at least for those two things, and then they can disappear again.

Although having said that, I know their jobs are starting to question things now and need them to step back into their roles as well. Everything in this town runs so smoothly because of our people, and their seconds in command are currently doing it, which is fine for a short while but won't be okay for much longer.

“I think that’s a good idea. We’ll give them a couple more days and then send them a message or something,” Jensen replies.

“Alright, we’ll do that,” Trick agrees.

“We need to call Pete and see if he wants to be involved in this. I know Elijah’s just got back, but we promised him we would call him with any Hunt updates,” Luc says.

“I’ll send him a text now. There’s probably no point in calling him because he just won’t answer. He’ll at least read a message.” I say, pulling out my phone and writing a text with as much information as I can fit but still keeping it short.

Chapter Thirteen

After I've sent the message, I head upstairs to find something club-appropriate to wear. I want to blend in as much as possible. We've only got a couple of hours before we need to head off to get there in time to get everyone into position, but that means that I need to be dressed and ready now.

Thankfully, although club wear isn't really my scene, Pete did convince me to buy a couple of club-appropriate outfits just in case we went dancing and also for occasions like this. I pull out a short, skin-tight at the top black dress that flares out slightly at the bottom, which, with some blood-red heels and matching bag and makeup, should create a striking look that will fit in perfectly with everyone else in attendance. I do my makeup slightly heavier than usual and curl my waist-length hair into loose curls that bounce around my waist. As much as I want to take a jacket, I know there's no point. The club is going to be sweltering, and if anything goes tits up while we're in there, I won't be able to go back for my jacket anyway.

Putting everything I need into a small red bag that matches my heels, I also strap on knives to one thigh and a small gun to the other as I check in the mirror that they're both concealed, and no one is going to notice them. I check my phone one last time to see if Pete has replied, but there are no new messages, so I'm assuming that he's still too wrapped up in Elijah or maybe even in his project. Both of these are fine so long as he doesn't get mad because he wanted to come and he missed it.

As I pull open my door, I hear his familiar voice downstairs. Never mind, he obviously decided to just come straight up instead of messaging.

When I get to the bottom of the stairs and make my way into the front room, where everyone is sitting and going over the details of the job again, I'm greeted by smirks, heated looks, and wolf whistles as they all tell me how good I look, and I try not to blush.

"And I was worried that you might need help to pick something out," Pete grins, looking me over. He then clutches his hands to his chest dramatically.

“My little girl is all grown up.”

“Fuck off,” I chuckle as I take a seat next to Cash, who promptly pulls me onto his lap, “I take it you’re coming with us on the job?”

“Yes, I am, and I brought goodies,” he grins as he rummages around in his bag.

“Oh, what did you bring?” I ask him curiously as he starts to pull things out of his bag.

“I’m assuming that you planned to just go in with mics and not cameras since it would be obvious with the cameras?” Pete asks as he holds two small boxes that almost look like jewelry boxes in his hands.

Trick nods, “Yeah, you presumed right. Although the cameras are small, they aren’t small enough, and there’s actually not much point in wearing them because they’re easily noticeable for what they are.”

Pete grins, “The old ones used to be.”

“I’m assuming from your proud smile that you and the guys have come up with something better?” Luc guesses with a smile.

Peter nods, “Yeah, we only have two since they’re prototypes at the moment, and this will be their first field test.”

“Okay, well, you know we’re always happy to be the guinea pigs in this situation, and we’ll still have the mics hooked up in the unlikely event that the cameras malfunction or have an issue that you hadn’t anticipated.” Trick replies, sounding impressed, like we always are when they come up with new gadgets for us to play with.

“It shouldn’t, at least the camera side of it shouldn’t; that’s quite straightforward and not really much different from the usual. The only difference is that it’s a lot smaller so that it can be concealed a lot easier. The thing that might cause an issue is that it’s got facial recognition built into it and a few other things that should be able to pick up on things like if anyone is concealing a weapon, anyone’s past record, that sort of thing.”

“Okay, wow, does that mean that we can see that somehow when we look at people?” Jensen asks excitedly, despite the fact he won’t be getting a go this time.

Pete chuckles, “Unfortunately, we haven’t developed the tech for that yet, and it’s going to be a while before we do. All the information from the cameras will get sent back to either a surveillance van or since we’re not using one this time, my laptop, and it will also help to get solid confirmation that who you are speaking to is actually Hunt. You’d be surprised how many

high profile criminals get lesser charges purely on the grounds that the camera is shakey or grainy and there isn't a good enough picture."

"Seriously?" Rage asks.

"Oh yeah, it's a massive issue. If we can get these working properly, then it will eliminate that line of defense that they all try to rely on," Pete replies.

"That's great, man, I had no idea that it was such a big problem," Atlas adds.

"What do they look like?" I ask curiously.

Pete grins, "Well, we've got a few different designs in mind for them so that they can easily blend in with different outfits and scenarios, that kind of thing, but for the prototype, we wanted to have it installed on the easiest thing that we could think of."

I'm about to yell at him just to hurry up and show me already because I really am that impatient to see what he's designed, but fortunately, he must see whatever expression I'm pulling because he opens one of the boxes and passes it to me. I'm actually really surprised about what's inside. Nestled on some tissue paper is a necklace on a simple silver chain, with a pink quartz teardrop-shaped pendant that's about as big as my fingernails, and my fingernails aren't exactly big. To think that there is a whole ass camera and a pretty damn sophisticated one at that inside this tiny thing is incredible. It is so incredible that I start to question whether it's true or not, and I can't help myself when I lift it up to my face, holding it as close as possible to my eye and peering inside to see if I can see the lens or something.

Pete chuckles, "Clever, right?"

"Dude, I know it's a camera, and I can't fucking see anything that would give it away," I reply, turning it over to see if there's any sign of the mechanics of it on the back.

Since it's obvious that I'm not going to be giving it back any time soon, Pete hands around the other box, which contains a similar necklace that's got a blue stone in it, and the pedant is a different shape as well. It's pretty, and I definitely wouldn't assume that it's a camera.

"These are really impressive," Cash compliments as he looks it over and then hands it back.

"Thanks, man, Ever you should probably just put your's on. It will save time having to do it later," Peter suggests, and I do as he suggests and carefully pull it on.

"Alright, let's go. We don't want to be late to set up and meet Rylie. Is

everyone clear on the plan now with the addition of the cameras that will give us a better insight?” Trick asks as we stand up and start to make our way toward the front door.

“Yeah,” we all reply together because we know that he’s going to ask at least three more times before we get to the location and possibly even when we’re there as well.

It’s the way that he reassures himself, and he has been doing it even more now that he can’t be in there with us. We all know why, and we all know that he needs to do it for his own peace of mind, so we go with it. I am hoping that this job will be easier than the others for him because only two of us are going in anyway, and he’s not the only one on the outskirts keeping watch.

We split up as soon as we get outside, heading to various different cars since we can’t go in anything big that will gain too much attention. Pete ends up driving Trick in the car that’s going to be parked across from the club because he’s going to be keeping an eye on the cameras and making sure that if they do malfunction, we know immediately and can adjust how we’re running things inside.

We’ve all got our earpieces in already because it just seems like a good idea, and again, it will be one less thing that we have to do when we get to the location. I’m in the car with Jensen and Rage. While they’re chatting about something that I’ll admit I’ve fully tuned out on, I text Rylie to make sure she knows we’re on our way and what car to meet me at. Since Pete has the other necklace, and Trick’s car is going to be parked closest to the club, it was decided that it would be easiest to get her to meet at that one.

I must admit that I’m half expecting her to either not reply at all or tell me that she’s not going to be able to make it, so I am kind of surprised when she replies immediately.

We leave the cars a fair distance away from the club, and I’m glad that Pete gave me a long jacket to put over my dress as we were leaving because I honestly hadn’t thought about how damn cold walking to the club would be, I’m still not going to bother wearing it in the club itself though, I’m just going to leave it in Trick and Pete’s car. I split up from Rage and Jensen as they head into the diner across the street from the club and take seats; looking over the menu, I head further up the road to Trick’s car and hop in, shivering as I do.

“Bet you’re glad that I gave you that jacket now,” Pete practically gloats.

I stick my tongue out at him for his tone but then reply, “Yeah I am, thank

you.”

“You’re welcome,” he replies.

“Head’s up, Rylie is coming up the street, she’ll be here in two minutes,” Trick suddenly interrupts, and I glance out of the back window to see her approaching the car.

“Hey guys,” she smiles as she slides in, puts her bag on the floor and shuts the door, “it’s fucking cold out there.”

“Tell me about it,” I grumble and then smile as I look her over, “looking good.”

She smirks, “Thanks, I can scrub up and make myself into a typical girl when I have to.”

I smile at that; some things don’t really change, and I like that.

“Are you clear on the plan?” Trick asks.

Rylie smiles, “Yeah, I’m all good. You guys have our backs, and we’re going to locate and flush him out, then apprehend him and take him back to headquarters for questioning.”

“Yeah you’ve got it,” Trick replies.

“It’s going to be a damn long night,” I mutter.

“Oh yeah, thank god the coffee shop at headquarters operates twenty-four hours a day because otherwise, I don’t think I would survive,” Rylie replies.

“Me neither,” Pete agrees with her, “I’ve also got a camera for you. It’s a prototype.”

Peter then goes on to explain all of the information about it, and Rylie is suitably impressed.

“Right, we’re all ready to go,” I say as I glance at Rylie, who nods in agreement. “What time is Hunt due to arrive, according to your contact?”

Rylie pulls out her phone and checks it before she replies, “In about fifteen minutes.”

“We should really head in then, we need to scope the place out first to make sure that we’ve got all the exits covered by the guys,” I reply.

“Speaking of,” Trick says, “Are you all in position and ready to go?”

His question is answered with a mixture of different yeses, and I catch Rylie’s smile as she obviously hears them in her own earpiece that she’s just been given, along with the necklace that she’s pulled on.

When I raise my eyebrow in question, she says, “I’m just not used to having people in my ear on jobs. It’s strangely reassuring.”

I smile, understanding where she’s coming from as I reply, “It’s nice to

know that you have people that have your back if something goes wrong and that there's less chance of things going really bad because you have that backup."

She nods, "It's less lonely too."

"That too," I smile.

"Alright, you two head in," Trick interrupts, sounding tense.

"I've already got your cameras up, and everything is working as it should. I'm going to be in your ear as well, and I'll let you know if anything concerning pops up with the information that they gather. I'm guessing there are going to be a few pieces of concerning information since Hunt is very unlikely to be traveling unguarded." Peter adds.

Rylie and I both nod that we understand and take off our jackets as we open the doors and head out. We link arms as we cross the street. We start to head for the back of the line that is already forming outside but the bouncers gesture us toward them.

I must admit that at first, I think that they've somehow caught us already, and we're going to be taken into a back room somewhere and are about to have some fun getting ourselves out while the guys freak out. Fortunately, or maybe unfortunately because now I'm disappointed, they just think we're hot and they let us straight in.

Rylie and I share a smile as we head through the crowds to the bar.

"Just a little bit different from when we used to hang out," Rylie comments.

"Yeah, but we're still in danger, more so now than we were before."

"True, so just as fun as it used to be then," Rylie chuckles.

"Exactly," I agree.

We order our drinks and then move to the back of the club and take a seat in one of the empty booths. The location gives us a perfect view over most of the club and, more importantly, all of the entrances, so we'll be able to see when Hunt makes his appearance.

"You know Jynx is going to be mad as hell that she missed out on this," I mutter as I sip my drink.

Rylie chuckles, "Oh, I have no doubt about that, although I'm sure there will be other instances where she will be involved, and I'll get to work with her. She's a fucking legend in the criminal world, you both are actually."

I smirk, "It's why we get on so well." I decide to change the subject because it's always a bit dodgy to discuss other people in our line of work,

and it's going to take a while before I can trust Rylie as much as I do Jynx and Lyric. There is a chance that I may not be able to, and that's something that we're just going to have to accept. "Did you let your Mom you were okay?"

Rylie rolls her eyes, "You know, for a big league crime boss or whatever the fuck you want to call her, she sure is overdramatic. She demanded photo proof that I really was okay and I have to go and see her in a couple of days. Although that's mostly because I missed Christmas, and she and Dad missed me."

I grin, my eyes, like hers constantly scanning the surroundings as we talk. We've both been trained on how to hold a casual conversation but still pay attention to our surroundings so that we don't miss anything or get caught off guard.

"That's kind of cute though," I tell her adding, "that they care so much and they really missed you."

"Yeah, I know," she smiles, "they've also both got their feelers out, neither of them are fucking happy with Hunt, and we'd better find him before my father does because if he gets to him first, then we'll never find him or any sign of him ever again."

"You know, I keep forgetting what he does for a job," I reply, trying to be a little bit careful about what I say because although it doesn't seem like anyone is listening, that doesn't mean they aren't, and we need to be cautious about what's being said, which we haven't really been up until now.

I think Rylie realises this at the same time I do because her smile becomes brighter, faker and she gives me a look, as she replies vaguely, "Yeah, people usually do."

Pete's voice comes over the earpieces, and I pick my drink up, stirring the straw and pretending I'm people watching as Rylie does something similar.

"There's no sign of Hunt out here yet," he tells us, "but there are a couple of people in the club that are armed. The guy in the green shirt by the bar who is facing the door and the woman in the middle of the dance floor with the purple dress."

"Both have drinks, but neither have drunk very much of them," I point out.

"So either, they're scouting the place to make sure it's safe for Hunt or they know he's about to arrive and have a bone to pick with him," Atlas suggests through the earpiece.

Chapter Fourteen

“Well, according to my contact, he should be here in five minutes, so we’re about to find out,” Rylie adds. And then frowns, “They’re trying to be subtle about it, but they’re together. They keep sharing looks.”

“I noticed that,” I agree.

“The good news is that their attention is solely focused on the door. They glanced around as they walked in, but they paid no attention to you two,” Pete tells us.

“Good, let’s keep it that way,” I suggest, “we’re out of the way as it is with a perfect view of the room, so we’ll stay put rather than risk drawing their attention.”

“Good idea,” Riot replies, concern lacing his tone as it always does when I’m doing something separate from them.

“If you could try and point the pendant at more of the room, I can see if I can identify anything else concerning,” Peter suggests.

An idea flits through my mind. It should look natural enough and not suspicious because I do it whenever I wear a necklace anyway; I lift the pendant so that the chain is over my cheeks and above my top lip, where I slowly run the pendant back and forth along the chain, trying to cover the front and the lens as I do it.

“Genius, bestie,” Peter says in my ear, and I try not to smile. “Move a tiny bit slower. That’s it.”

While he concentrates, Rylie frowns as she looks down at her phone, “He should’ve been here by now.”

“He may still turn up. Maybe he’s just late?” I reply, still playing with my necklace.

Rylie shakes her head, “I learned a few things while I was following, and while he had me, he can’t be late; he always has to be on time, or he loses his shit.”

I raise my eyebrows, “Well, that’s not a good sign.”

“Your contact could’ve gotten the time wrong?” Trick suggests over the

earpiece.

“Hmm, maybe,” Rylie replies, although she doesn’t seem to be that convinced.

“The system is lagging slightly,” Pete says, and I can tell he’s disappointed, “it shouldn’t take long to fix, but I can’t do anything about it now. Thankfully, it’s still working enough for me to be able to find and identify anyone known to us, but it’s not instant.”

“Just let us know if anything pops up,” I reply, and then add, “Can I drop the necklace now? It’s starting to make my lips sore.”

“Shit, sorry, yeah, you can.” He replies.

Rylie and I slip into a casual conversation while we keep an eye on the building and everyone in it. About half an hour into the conversation, the man and the woman who were carrying weapons leave, and the guys outside report that they got into a vehicle and left the area. It’s starting to look less and less likely that Hunt is going to turn up, and I feel disappointment flood through me. I really was hoping that we’d be able to close this case and finally get rid of him today.

I should’ve known that it wasn’t going to be that simple.

“Guys,” Jensen speaks for the first time in a while over the earpieces, “there’s a woman who can’t be much older than us; in fact, she’s probably younger. She has just been let in by the bouncers with no questions asked, despite the fact she’s dressed in jeans and a hoodie and wouldn’t normally be let in thanks to the dress code.”

“I see her,” I comment as I lift my necklace to my mouth again so that Peter’s camera can do its thing.

Rylie and I continue to sip our drinks as we watch her movements. Jensen is right; she definitely doesn’t fit in here, surrounded by women in tiny dresses, but she doesn’t seem uncomfortable or nervous. In fact, she walks up to the bar with confidence and chats to the bartender like she knows him while he makes her a drink before she turns to look around the club.

“She’s on the watchlist,” Pete suddenly says, “in fact, she’s been wanted for a few years.”

“What do you want us to do?” Rylie asks.

“It’s unlikely that Hunt is going to turn up now, and it’s a bit too big of a coincidence that she’s here where Hunt was supposed to be. Bring her in.” Trick replies.

“Got it, but she clearly knows the workers here, so we’re going to have to

follow her when she leaves,” I reply.

There’s no way I want to risk taking her now and either being stopped by the workers or reported to Hunt if he does have people here keeping an eye on things even though he didn’t turn up.

“Got it, stay safe.” Trick replies.

“We’ll be watching you like a hawk,” Atlas adds, a threat in his voice that makes me shiver.

“We have cars parked in both directions, so it should be simple enough to get her into one. Do you two have zip ties on you?” Luc asks.

“I do,” Rylie replies.

“Great, let us know when she leaves; follow her, secure her, and get her into the closest vehicle. We’ll transfer her into the van when we leave the city so that she doesn’t see where headquarters is in the unlikely event that she’s released.” Trick tells us.

“I’ll move the van so it’s parked to the left of the entrance up the road. That’s the direction that she walked up to the club in, so hopefully, she’s heading that way. It would be easier if she were put straight into the van rather than us having to make the switch and risk her being seen in the back of our cars yelling or struggling.” Jensen suggests.

“Yeah, that’s a good point,” Trick replies, “do that.”

“You’re going to need to be quick. She’s just finished her drink, and now she’s leaving,” I tell him as Rylie, and I wait a few seconds before getting up and following her out at a safe distance.

“She was definitely here looking for someone that she didn’t find,” Rylie comments.

“We need to keep a safe distance so we don’t make her suspicious within view of the club. Can you guys let us know which way she heads when she steps out?” I ask.

“On it,” Atlas comments, having the best view of the entire street thanks to being on the roof. “She went to the left. Good call on moving the van, Jensen.”

We weave through the crowd and head out of the door, stumbling and giggling as we make our way past the bouncers so that they just assume we’re drunk and we should be considering the amount of time in the club. We immediately head to the left, walking past all of the people still in the line, waiting to be let in.

“I’ve got a visual,” I say quietly as I spot her walking ahead of us like

she's in no particular rush, but then why would she be?

We're pretty far away from the club now, and they shouldn't be able to see us, so I say to Rylie, "We need to catch up with her as she gets to the back of the van. It will cause less of a scene."

"I agree," Rylie replies and then glances at my feet, "can you speed up in those?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine," I reply.

We increase the pace as we catch up, and I wonder why she's completely oblivious to our presence. If she's on the watch list, then she's supposedly well trained and dangerous, although you wouldn't think that to look at her, but then again, you wouldn't expect Lyric to be capable of what she is when you look at her, she looks far too innocent.

Suddenly, I see it, "She's got headphones in."

Rylie frowns, "That's really not smart and is actually pretty freaking confusing. Shouldn't she know better?"

There's no time to answer her or puzzle it out as Rylie loops around in front of her, and I stop behind her. She turns around when Rylie intercepts her, and her warm brown eyes are filled with trepidation.

"Wh-what's going on? I don't have any money for you," she says, as she holds her hands up.

"We're not robbing you, but we do need you to come with us," I tell her, something about her demeanor not sitting right with me.

It's almost like I recognise something in her, and I don't like that.

She shakes her head rapidly as she backs up, only for Rylie to grab her arms. Jensen starts to get out of the van, and I hold my hand up, making him pause. I can hear the questions in my ears, but I can't answer them now. It's like I know that seeing Jensen is going to escalate the situation, and that's not something that we want.

"Please, don't," she asks, "I don't want to be responsible."

My eyebrows rise. Yeah, that's confusing as hell, but we don't have a choice; we need to take her in, and more than that, I am now incredibly curious about her, so I tell her, "We have to."

Defeat floods her expression as Rylie secures her hands and puts her into the back of the van.

"That was not how I thought that would go," she comments as we both get into the front of the van, which is completely separate and soundproofed from the back.

Jensen gives me a curious look but starts the van as we head out of the city.

“Is everyone on the road now?” Atlas asks.

Everyone confirms that they’re on the way to headquarters like we originally planned, although we’re heading there with a different prisoner than we’re supposed to have and one that is somehow more complex and intriguing, at least to me, than Hunt is.

“Okay, what’s going on?” Trick asks, once everyone has confirmed.

“There’s something going on with her; she didn’t resist. You heard her, and asking for us not to was almost like a plea for us, not for her,” I reply, trying to put into words what’s confusing me about the situation.

“I agree with Ever, there’s something. She seems almost damaged but really capable. She wasn’t scared of us, not even initially when she asked us if we were going to mug her. She behaved like she was, but it wasn’t until we said that we were going to take her in that she showed genuine fear.” Rylie comments.

“Okay, well, we’ll get to the bottom of it when we get to headquarters. I’ll talk to Mr R and explain what has happened and who we are bringing in. Keep your earpieces in for the moment so I can let you know what he says.” Trick replies.

“Alright, but I’d like to question her, please,” I say. I just feel like it should be me.

“That’s fine with me,” Trick replies.

“We’ll be on the other side of the glass if you need us, like always.” Riot adds more to reassure himself, I think.

It falls silent for a moment as I try to put my finger on what it is about her that tells me she needs help and not that she needs to be carted off to prison like her being on the watchlist would suggest.

“Mr R says that she’s on the list because she’s been seen more than once with Hunt,” Trick suddenly says.

“So she must have been there waiting for him as well, then,” Rage says.

“It looks like it. The problem is they don’t know how she’s associated with Hunt, just that she is,” Trick replies.

“So she could be entirely innocent,” Rafe asks.

“I’d agree, but Hunt doesn’t surround himself with innocent people,” Rylie comments.

“It is strange that there’s no information on her other than her link to Hunt

though,” Atlas says.

“According to Mr R she’s only twenty, too,” Trick adds, the frown in his voice heavy.

“We’ll get it sorted out as soon as we get to headquarters,” Rage says reassuringly.

“Shit,” Luc suddenly curses, “what if she’s got one of those bug things in her?”

“The scanners are in place at the first set of gates, and they’ll alert us if anyone in the vehicles or the vehicles themselves are bugged,” Pete replies. “Obviously, it would be better if we could get her scanned away from headquarters, but the wands still aren’t ready, and Gauld was at headquarters anyway, so he already knows where it is.”

“Right, okay, that makes sense,” Luc replies, sounding somewhat relieved now.

There’s not much talking happening as we make our way there. I’m too busy going over the questions that I’d like to ask her, and Rylie is just as quiet, so I assume that she’s thinking about the latest mystery presented to us too.

Before we get there, we all take out our earpieces since there’s not much point in keeping them in any longer.

As we drive, I ask Jensen, “I don’t suppose my bag is in here?”

Jensen smirks as he points behind us to the small gap between our seats and the sealed-off part of the van in the back, “I grabbed it quickly before I moved the van. I also got Rylie’s just in case.”

“Thanks,” Rylie smiles, and I pass the bag to her and then pull out mine.

“This is why I love you so much,” I admit as I rummage through my bag and pull out some jeans, a black hoodie and my sneakers, and start getting changed, pulling my jeans on underneath my dress.

“Great minds think alike,” Rylie grins as she pulls out an outfit very similar to mine.

“This is why we’ve always gotten on so well,” I reply.

Just like me, Rylie keeps her dress on folding it so it looks more like a top than a dress and then pulls a hoody on over the top. It only takes a few more minutes before we’re both a lot more comfortable and happier than we were when we were in the club dresses. Apparently, that’s still not either of our things.

For the rest of the drive, we are either lost in our own thoughts about the

intricacies of this newest development, or at least that's what I'm thinking about, or we're all arguing about what music to put on because apparently we have conflicting interests up until a point and then we're singing at the top of our lungs.

I think Jensen, Rylie, and I all hold our breath as we head through the brand-new security sensors that are at the first gate. When there's no alarm, and the agents there don't come out to stop us, we breathe a sigh of relief, no bug in the woman. This is surprising because my mother was supposedly dating him, which suggests a certain level of care, and yet, Hunt had a bug put into her, and we may never know whether that was consensual or if she had no idea that it was there.

Instead of pulling up to the front of the building, which is where we would usually go in because we have a person of interest, we need to head around the side of the building where it slopes down, and we can get access to the corridors that will lead to the interrogation rooms, it means that whoever we're bringing in only really gets to see the blank and plain corridors. Nothing that gives anything away about where they are or who they're actually dealing with. The others will still park around the front, and they'll meet us in the interrogation room hallway.

I call her a person of interest because it feels weird to call her a prisoner because there's something just off about all of this, and my instincts aren't usually wrong.

"What's her name?" I ask as we pull up outside the double doors.

Jensen answers me, "I think Pete said that it was Emmerson."

I nod as Rylie, and I get out of the van to open the doors so that Jensen can back the van up so that it actually backs up into the building so that we can get Emmerson out, and she really doesn't see anything outside that could tip her off to where we are. Once we've gotten her out and led her away, Jensen will move forward again and park before joining us inside.

Rylie and I share a look as the van stops, and we prepare to open the doors. My adrenaline always picks up at this point because you never really know what you're going to be opening the doors to. I've seen some shit over the years working for Mr R and one of the main things I've learned is that you should never assume that just because they were secured when you put them in there, they still will be when you open the doors. I've also had a surprising number be naked when we open the doors, and I honestly don't know how they manage that one or why they want to make themselves more vulnerable.

“Ready,” Rylie grins, a spark in her eye. It’s so obvious that she loves this just as much as I do.

“Ready,” I smirk.

Rylie takes up a solid stance, ready to either grab her or fight her; depending on how Emmerson decides to handle this, more often than not, they come out swinging.

I pull the door open, and when nothing happens, I peer inside to find Emmerson watching us with knowledge and caution far beyond her years. She stays sitting down, and I raise my eyebrow.

“I didn’t want to get up in case you thought I was preparing to bolt or going to be incredibly stupid and try to attack you,” she explains.

I can’t help it; my eyebrows raise more at her response. She is so not what I expected her to be.

Chapter Fifteen

“Okay, well, we appreciate that. Why don’t you step out? We just have a few questions to ask you,” Rylie says.

She almost smirks at that, like she knows exactly why she’s here, and she is expecting a lot of questions. Despite this, she does as we’ve asked her and stands up, making her way to the back of the van and the exit. There is still a hint of apprehension in her eyes, which is entirely understandable because, at the end of the day, she has no idea if we actually mean what we say and if we only want to talk to her and nothing else.

We lead her down the corridor and through a door at the end so that Jensen can park the van and catch up. As we walk through the second hallway leading her to the interrogation rooms, I keep a close eye on her, watching for any sign that she’s about to bolt or seeing if she shows any of what she’s feeling through her expressions or movements.

Curiously enough, apart from that slight apprehension in her eyes, she is completely calm. There are no micro-expressions, no twitching, or nervous movements, and she even keeps her eyes forward and doesn’t nervously glance around or try to spot things that could give her a clue as to where we are or what we want.

She is kind of a contradiction.

My phone buzzes as we get to the right hallway, and I briefly pull it out to see that Trick has messaged me with the interrogation room number and to let me know that they are all waiting in the viewing room. Mr R has been informed about what is going on and is curious enough about the situation that he’s waiting with them.

I don’t bother replying; I just put my phone back in my pocket and then open the right door; as Emmerson walks through it, Rylie raises her eyebrows in question, and I shrug. I assume she’s asking me if I want her to come in with me or not. I really don’t mind. I just want to get to the bottom of it.

Both of us enter the room and find Emmerson sitting at the table.

“Do you have any idea why we’ve brought you in?” I ask her as I take a

seat opposite her, and Rylie sits next to me, letting me take the lead.

Emmerson nods, "Because of my link to Hunt, I assume."

When she says his name, her expression becomes dark, and her eyes flash with intense rage before she completely blanks her expression once again, and I try not to show my surprise.

"That's right, although I have to admit we don't have much on you and why you're linked to him," I say, leaning back in my chair and watching her, "so why don't we start with names I'm Ever and this is Rylie."

Immediately, any pretense of nonchalance disappears in a second, and she leans forward, hope filling her eyes and confusing me.

"Wait, Rylie, as in Rylie, who escaped?" she asks and, before we can answer, looks to me and adds, "With the help of you and some seriously intimidating men? You took Quinn too, he's so fucking mad about that, it's awesome."

I tilt my head, "Yeah, I guess that is us."

She nods, "Maybe you can help me, hell you might be the only people who fucking can at this point."

"Alright," I say, as I feel Rylie shift slightly next to me in her surprise, "let's take it from the beginning, and we'll do the best we can to help you."

She nods, deflating slightly but recognising that we need information first before we can consider whether we can help her or not. I know we're going to; we help everyone who asks it of us, and she is no different.

"What do you need to know?" she asks, determination filling her eyes. She then adds, "Also, my name is Emmerson Reinfield."

I nod that I've heard her and then ask, "First, how did you become associated with Hunt?"

She sighs as shadows fill her eyes and crosses her arms over her chest defensively, "Hunt, or cunt as I like to call him, started dating my mother when I was fourteen, I hated him and knew he was dodgy as fuck, but she had that whole, he can take care of us thing going on. I adore my mother, but she's not one of those people who can be without someone else to lean on. You know?"

I think about what I know about my own mother, "Yeah, I get that."

"Anyway, he stuck around for two years but then lost interest in my mother. Which would have been great, except he found out that I was good with tech, all tech, and not to toot my own horn, but when I say good, I mean like crazy good, better than I should've been at sixteen. He wanted me to

design something for him and thought I wouldn't realise that it was pretty much a weapon and a damn fucking dangerous one too. I didn't need an excuse to tell him no, I fucking hated him anyway. The thing was, he didn't take it very well; he took my mother and me to one of his hotels, and I honestly thought that he was going to try and bribe me to do as I was told. I have never been so wrong."

I keep my expression blank, I really don't like where this is fucking heading, and I know that Rylie feels the same because not only can I feel the tension rolling off her, but her fists are clenched on her lap, out of sight from Emmerson.

Her eyes are staring into the distance as she continues, "In the middle of a lavish and expensive room, he tortured my mother and made me watch until I couldn't take anymore and told him that I'd make whatever he fucking wanted me to make so long as he stopped hurting my mom. Ever since then, that's what I do. If I refuse, then my mother is tortured in front of me, and he's gotten pretty fucking creative. As I've gotten older, he's also stopped letting me see her. He sends proof of life when I request it. The only time that I actually get to see her now is when I refuse to do something that he's asked me to."

I know I shouldn't, but I do feel relieved that it wasn't anything that my mind had dreamed up, although it's fucking awful and fucking despicable, and I can't imagine how hard it's been for her.

She's still staring off into the distance, her memories clearly haunting her, until one of the guys knocks lightly on the window, signaling that they want to talk to us and making her jump.

"We'll be back in a moment," I tell her softly as Rylie and I stand up.

She looks defeated as she sits down and starts to nervously chew on her fingernails, which looks awkward as hell, considering that her hands are still bound.

When we get outside the door, we immediately head into the room next to ours.

"What do you think?" Mr R asks me.

"I think she's telling the truth," I reply.

"So do I, either that or she's an incredibly good actress," Rylie replies.

"I've got someone looking into her better now that we know her full and real name. The last name that always came up was not the one that she just gave you." Mr R explains.

“So, that’s why she told us her full name; that makes sense,” Rylie mutters.

“We need to know if she’s telling the truth about designing the tech for Hunt. I mean, if she is, she’s been doing it for years, and she is at genius level,” Rafe points out, as his gaze drifts back to her. She’s still chewing her nails, and her eyes are darting around the room.

“Ask her to prove that she’s the designer,” Jensen suggests, “tell her that we have some of Hunt’s tech in our possession and get her to describe it.”

“Or draw it,” Trick adds, handing a notepad and pencil to me. “Pete always draws out his designs, and I’m sure she’ll be able to if she really designed it. Expect it to be rough; from my experience, it’s more to get their vague idea down so they can better visualize it. There’s not much artistry to it, at least there isn’t with Pete’s.”

“Hey, that’s rude. They make sense to me,” Pete replies indignantly and then adds, “As soon as she’s cleared, I want to talk to her. If she’s really designed the chip, she’s insanely fucking clever, and I want to pick her brains.”

I smile, “I thought you might. We have to clear her first and make sure that she’s actually telling the truth.”

Pete pouts but adds, “I know. I’m going to be patient.”

I almost scoff at that, but I leave it alone for now.

“Let us know if you get any information back from her real name,” Rylie adds.

“Before you guys head back in, what do you think the chances are that her mother is still alive?” Cash asks the question that has occurred to me.

“I don’t think that it’s very likely. It depends how long ago it was that she saw her last,” Rylie replies.

“I think you’re right. I doubt that it’s very often that she refuses a job and risks her mother,” Luc replies.

“Good points, but also, could he risk Emmerson saying no and not having her mother to torture?” Atlas asks.

“Threats are very persuasive. He could call her bluff and graphically describe everything that he’s going to do to her. That may be enough to make her change her mind,” Jensen points out.

“Ask her what her mother’s name is. We’ll look into that too and see what we can find out, and I can put out a search for her. Hopefully, we can locate her either alive or as a Jane Doe. We need to get her mother away from Hunt,

and if this is all true, then we can't let her go back either," Mr R says, a frown making him look closer to his age than he usually does.

"Got it, boss," I reply.

Rylie and I quickly leave the room, wanting to get back to Emmerson and get some answers to the questions we have. I really hope that she's telling the truth because she's right; we can help her, and we're most likely the only people who can.

She sits up straighter as we enter the room again.

"First, can you tell us your mom's full name? We're going to try and locate her," Rylie asks her.

"Lucy Reinfeild," she replies immediately, and I can see the hope in her eyes that we believe her and are actually going to help her.

I really fucking hope that's true and we can. As naive as it may be, I also hope that her mother is still alive and easily rescued by us or one of the other teams.

"Great, thank you," I reply, and then place the notepad and pencil in front of her. She looks at it curiously but doesn't question it; instead, she waits for me to explain. "We have some of Hunt's tech in our possession; prove to us that you designed it. Either by writing the specs down or drawing it and explaining it. We need something to back up your claims."

Understanding lights up her eyes, and she nods as she leans forward and grabs the notepad and pencil with unbound hands. "Of course."

"Care to explain the lack of cable ties?" I ask her, not feeling like there's a threat or issue but still curious.

She looks sheepish and shrugs, "Being restrained puts me on edge and not in a kinky way, but an almost panicking way. I had to get them off before I lost my shit which wouldn't have worked in my favour, and if I'd asked and you'd said no, that would've heightened my panic even more."

I can see the trauma that's attached to those words, and I instantly feel bad that we put her in the situation again. To be fair, she handled it really fucking well; I know what she's describing with the losing her shit. It's literally like walking on a knife's edge, and I know that from personal experience.

"I'm sorry," Rylie says, and I glance over to see that she has the same kind of understanding in her eyes.

"Me too. Honestly, if you told us, we would've worked something else out," I add.

Our responses clearly shock her because she looks up from what she's

writing with surprise, “Thank you.”

It makes me sad that she feels like she has to thank us for a basic common courtesy, but at the same time, it doesn't surprise me because she's had Hunt in her life for the last few years, and he definitely hasn't shown her any common courtesy.

It takes a few moments, but finally, she looks up. There's a spark in her eyes and life in her that she didn't have a few moments ago, and it makes her look a lot younger than she did a few moments ago. Despite being forced into it, she clearly loves what she makes.

“I'm assuming since Gauld was kept here and Amelia's body was also taken by you, that the tech you have is the microchip. It tracks locations and also works as a listening device and a way to take someone out if they say the trigger phase, and they're where they shouldn't be. Hunt has an app that alerts him, and then he can press the button to trigger the poison, which is undetectable on autopsy or not. Their lives are literally in his hands,” she sneers, looking disgusted and regretful, and I know that she blames herself.

Before either Rylie or I can reply to her, she turns the page around, and I wouldn't be able to hide the impressed look on my face if I wanted to. She's written down what I can only assume are detailed specifications of the chip, as well as an incredibly detailed drawing with parts labeled. Not only that, but she's added her signature as well. It occurs to me that she could've just written that down, and it probably would've convinced us, but she clearly didn't want to risk us not believing her, so she's written down as much information about it as she possibly could.

“If it's not enough, or you need some more information, I'll try to give it to you,” she says, a slight tinge of desperation coating her tone.

“Wow, this is more than enough,” Rylie mutters as she picks it up, gives me a look, and then leaves the room.

Once I'm left alone, I say, “You know it's not your fault, and you were forced to build the things that you have, right?”

Her eyes widen at my words, but she nods surprisingly, “I do know that, on a logical level, on an emotional one, though. That's where it gets complicated.”

“That's understandable,” I admit.

“I'll make you a list of everything that I've ever designed for him,” she starts and then adds, “Actually, I have a database full of the specs and plans and all of that sort of thing; it's really heavily encrypted though so I'd need to

access it myself, and I understand that you're unlikely to want me near any computers, which is why I didn't suggest showing you in the first place."

I nod, "You're right. Let's get confirmation on this first and then see how we can help you. If that all comes back clear, then we might be able to get someone to sit with you so that they can monitor that you're not up to something that you shouldn't be. We've got a few tech geniuses that will be able to keep up with you."

She smiles, "Good, I really would feel better if you had it all. You'd stand a better chance of bringing him in, and I have been designing counter weapons or things to disable the tech since he first started to get me to build questionable stuff. The plans are in there, so if I'm allowed to, I can help you build them or try and advise one of your tech people on how to do it."

"You know, that's incredibly helpful. I'm sure that you'll be asked to help at some point once we've cleared you," I reply.

She shrugs, "All I've ever wanted to do is build things that help people, and I've been forced into designing and building things that harm instead. I fucking hate it, and I want to fix it, and the damage that my tech has done, this is the only way I know how."

"That's commendable, and I will make sure that you get the chance." She smiles at my response, and I change the subject, "You're clearly very valuable to Hunt, so why weren't you bugged?"

She smirks and then holds up her wrist where there's a tiny bump, "I am, but it's one that's controlled by me, not him. It has no poison in it, and it doesn't send him my location unless I need it to. It sends false locations. He hasn't suspected anything yet."

I can't help but smile once my heartbeat has calmed down from thinking she's been bugged and Hunt's been listening to our conversation. I am reasonably sure that she dumbed down that explanation a lot so that I could understand it, and I'm grateful. Peter is going to be mad as fucking hell that he's not in here right now so that he can ask all the technical questions that I'm not. Although he will be in heaven looking over the complicated plans that Emmerson has just written up.

Chapter Sixteen

He's also the best one to look over them since he's the only one, other than the tech guys, who would understand what was on it, and they would take too long to get here right now.

While we wait, something occurs to me.

"So you're just tech, as in building and designing things, right?" I ask her.

She nods curiously, clearly unsure where I'm going with this line of questioning, "Yeah, pretty much. I design what he asks me to, and then I build it. Depending on the complexity of the design, I either do just a few, or I build a prototype, and then he gets someone else to build them. In the last year or so, I've been making my designs that are overly complicated so that only I can build them, and then he only has a few and can't equip all of his people with this dangerous tech. It's not much, but it does make me feel slightly better to push back a bit and have some control over who gets them."

She is a really good person, and she's managed to stay that way even after all that she's been through. I'm sure she has her demons, and pretty fucking big ones at that, but it impresses me that she still has her morals despite the world she's been living in.

"Sometimes it's the things that seem small to us that actually make the biggest difference when it comes to pushing back against controlling assholes," I tell her.

She meets my eyes as understanding fills hers, nods, and then asks, "I feel like you were going somewhere different with that question?"

"Yeah, I was. Are you responsible for the Looney Tunes calling card that he leaves?"

She rolls her eyes, "Absolutely fucking not. He thinks he's being funny, and he's really not."

"Yeah, that makes sense," I reply. As I'm about to ask another question, the door opens again, and Rylie interrupts us.

Rylie smiles, "You check out. We've also found you're using your original name, and it was reported that you and your mother went missing about four

years ago, and no one has seen either of you since.”

Emmerson nods, “Yeah, we weren’t allowed to stay in contact. We’ve basically become prisoners, my mother more than me. The more compliant I was, the more freedom I was granted, hence why I was able to be out tonight. I was actually supposed to meet Hunt, but he didn’t show up. Either something happened, or he got tipped off that you guys were there. If he’d known that you guys were there though, he would’ve seen me, and there’s no way that he would’ve allowed me to be taken.”

I frown. That’s definitely something to be concerned about. I’m just hoping that it’s the first and not the second.

“We’ll sort it.” Rylie assures her, “I just need to borrow Ever; we need to figure out the next steps. Are we right in assuming that you will help us take down Hunt and identify all of the tech he is using?”

Emmerson nods, “Absolutely anything you need, but I want my mom. You have to save my mom.”

“We’ll try our best. That’s what we’re trying to figure out now.” Rylie assures her, and I try to give her a reassuring smile as I get up to leave.

My instincts are usually right, and they say that she is a victim in this scenario despite the things that she has been forced to create. I guess I feel a sense of kinship with her because of the things that I was forced to do for my father.

We step out of the door, letting it close behind us, and then head back into the other room.

“This is absolutely amazing,” Pete tells me as soon as I walk in, his eyes still scanning the piece of paper that Emmerson wrote on. “There’s absolutely no doubt that she made the bug, and it does way more than we even thought it did. I can’t even wrap my brain around the complexities and time that it would take to make something like this.”

“Okay, so what do you think?” I ask Mr R.

“Well, her story checks out,” Mr R replies, “it would be an amazing advantage to have her help us work out what tech he’s got and maybe even how to counteract it, not to mention she’s spent a considerable amount of time with him so could give us a decent advantage in that sense too. Before any of that, though, we need to make sure that she’s safe, and that means getting her into witness protection.”

“I agree that she needs to be in witness protection, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to take her off site though. We all remember what happened with

Gauld, and even though she's sure that her chip doesn't transmit her location, Hunt could've found another way to trace her here since she's so valuable to him. The safest place for her is here," Atlas suggests, and as soon as he says it, it makes perfect sense.

Mr Rising nods, "Yes, I agree, and actually, we have the facilities here that we can do that."

"Can you do it without her posing a security risk and being able to get into places where she shouldn't?" Trick asks, sounding worried.

"That's a really good point. Her story may check out, but the best covers are ones that are weaved with truth," Rylie points out, speaking from experience since her whole ghost status is pretty much her pretending to be someone that she's not.

I have to admit that sounds absolutely exhausting to me, but she seems to absolutely thrive in that environment like she was made to do it, and so long as she's happy, then so am I.

"Yes, there's a wing where agents who can't go home for whatever reason stay, it's got a canteen rec room, and private bedrooms and bathrooms. It can only be accessed and exited by a code and retinal scan. I have a few agents staying there at the moment, so I can get them to keep an eye on her as well and keep her company. She's not going to be able to have access to any sort of internet, but she can have everything else. Hopefully, she is agreeable." Mr R explains, and I honestly had no idea that we had all of that here.

"That's as good as it's going to get for her until she's proven that she's trustworthy. She has freedom but is still kept an eye on so no one else is put at risk," Riot replies with a slight frown.

He's most likely thinking along the same lines as I am. It will be fine so long as she doesn't feel like she's a prisoner, and we can prove her threat level to be low quickly. Otherwise, she could decide to be less cooperative and become defensive instead, and no one wants that. It will just make everything so much more complicated.

"Of course, you all realise that taking Emmerson away from Hunt is likely to escalate his behaviour. I don't get the feeling that he's fond of sharing what he considers his property, and he definitely considers Emmerson as his property," Jensen points out, as everyone looks at him, realisation dawning on us all that he is right.

"Maybe that's a good thing," Cash says.

"Cash is right; if he escalates his behaviour because he's feeling rattled or

panicking because he's lost his tech designer, which is actually his secret weapon, then there's a good chance that he'll retaliate before he's ready, and that could be the mistake that lets us catch him," Rafe adds.

"Yeah, or he's just going to throw everything he has at us, and we're not going to be able to keep up with it," Atlas replies, adding a more cynical viewpoint.

"We're aware of it, and hopefully Emmerson has information that she's willing to share that will help us if that is the case," Mr R, adds to the conversation.

It's definitely a concern, that's for sure, but to be honest, after the way he acted in his office when Quinn called him cunt instead of Hunt, I would be more willing to lean toward the emotional and unhinged response than the logical and calculated one. He lost his shit with Quinn, and it wasn't really a big deal. Us having something of his that he considers high value, and that's what Emmerson is to him. She's not a person; she's property. Us having her is going to make him mad as hell.

"What about her mother?" Peter asks, having finally put down the notes that Emmerson gave him and changing the subject.

"I've got people running programs and working on it now, facial recognition and scanning Jane Doe's country-wide just in case. They'll have the answers soon, and then we can give Emmerson some closure," Mr R replies.

"Great," I reply, glad that she's staying here and staying safe. I really hope that her mother is okay.

"It's getting late, why don't you guys head home and I'll get Emmerson all set up and explain what's happening?" Mr R suggests.

Before I can interrupt and say that I'd rather stay, Rylie does, "Actually, I was going to ask if I could stay at headquarters for a while anyway. At least while I'm on as a consultant, I don't want to risk someone getting nosy and following me home. Plus, I've got some work going on there for the next couple of weeks, and I can't go home anyway."

"That would work perfectly. Emmerson is already familiar with Rylie, and it's less likely that Emmerson is going to develop any resentment because Rylie can get her in and out and is well enough trained to be able to handle her and knows where to take her so that she doesn't find out too much before she's ready," Rafe points out.

"Exactly," Rylie agrees with a smile.

Mr R studies her for a moment, “If that’s what you’d like to do then that’s fine with me.”

Rylie nods and then turns back to face us, “I will keep you updated on anything I find out. Hopefully, she can give us a couple more locations to check out and possibly find him.”

“Thanks, Rylie,” Trick smiles.

“I will most likely be here tomorrow. I want to talk to her about the bug. I’m hoping she can help me work out the kinks with the handheld device to detect them,” Pete says excitedly and then looks at a smiling Mr R, “if that’s alright, sir.”

Mr R chuckles, “I was going to suggest that you see if she’ll talk to you. You’re more likely to understand what she’s talking about and you’re also capable of explaining it to the rest of us who don’t. I have to warn you though Pete, no matter how excited you get, please do not take her to the lab. Not until she’s one hundred percent cleared.”

Pete nods, his face solemn, “Of course. I wouldn’t even dream of it.”

“Alright, you guys head home. I’ll call you with an update,” Rylie says, and then smiles at Pete, “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You can count on it,” Pete grins. I know that if he thought he could get away with it, he’d be trying to talk her ear off now, despite the fact that it’s ridiculously late, and she should at least get the night to settle into her new normal before faced with an excited Pete.

“I just want to come and tell her what’s happening and then we can go,” I tell the room, and everyone nods.

“Okay, sounds good.” Trick smiles.

“I’ll keep you all updated on her mothers location,” Mr R adds solemnly as Rylie and I leave the room, I don’t think any of us are expecting to find her alive.

The odds are not in her favour.

Stepping back through the door, Emmerson looks up at us hopefully, being very careful to keep her hands in view on the table since they’re unbound.

“We’ve got people looking for your mother, and as soon as we locate her, we will rescue her and let you know we will bring her to you,” Rylie starts.

“Thank you,” Emmerson replies.

I decide to take over. I’m not sure how she’s going to feel about being put in witness protection, especially witness protection here, surrounded by agents.

“We are going to put you in witness protection until we’ve dealt with Hunt and his people, which, with your help hopefully won’t take that long. Because of Hunt’s reach and your unique circumstances, it’s been decided that the best place to ensure your safety is here.” I explain.

Her reaction is not what I expected in the slightest.

Her eyes fill with tears as she says, “I’m going to be safe? He won’t be able to get to me?”

She looks so much younger like this, heartbreakingly so.

“No, he won’t. You will be safe. We will all ensure it.” I promise her.

She swallows thickly but can’t seem to get any words out, so Rylie smiles and adds, “I’m going to keep you company since my house is being remodelled for the next couple of weeks, so at least you’re going to know someone.”

Emmerson smirks, “You mean you’re going to be there to keep an eye on me.”

“That too,” Rylie replies honestly, “I’m sure you can understand why.”

“I’d judge how good you guys really are if you didn’t have me watched.” She replies.

“I’ll leave you with Rylie then. I just wanted to make sure that you knew what was going on. Any questions that you may have, Rylie can answer,” I tell her.

“Thanks again. I’m glad you guys abducted me,” she jokes, and I let out a surprised laugh.

As I get to the door I say, “Just a heads up, our tech guy double checked your specs that you wrote down and he’s incredibly excited to meet you. In fact, he’d be in here now if he was allowed. He’s coming to see you tomorrow. They need your help with a detection device for the bugs; if you still want to help?”

She nods rapidly, sitting up straighter in her seat, “Absolutely, I can help with that, no problem at all.”

I nod, “Great, I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye,” Rylie responds, inclining her head slightly to let me know that she will keep me in the loop.

As I leave the room, I can’t help but think that it’s pretty obvious that she wants to make herself useful to us, not only so that we can help her locate her mother but also because she feels like she needs to make up for building and designing all of these things in the first place. I also think that she’s a little bit

like the rest of us and needs to stay busy. I feel like she might go slightly crazy if she's left without something to focus her mind on but then again, that can be said for most extremely intelligent people.

Rarely do they like to stay idle.

"Ready to go?" Jensen asks me as he wraps his arm around my shoulders and kisses the top of my head, making me feel all warm and fuzzy.

"Yeah, that was a long and twisty kind of night," I reply as we walk through the hallways and out the front to get our cars. The van is already parked there and waiting. Most people would think it's weird that we have one, but it was gifted to us by Alaric, and we've dinged and dented it a bit, so it looks less like a government kind of van and more like one you want to steer clear of in case you get abducted. In other words, it stands out a lot less.

"It definitely wasn't how I thought today was going to go," Cash replies.

"We didn't get Hunt, but that was a long shot anyway. I think this may have possibly worked out even better. We've got a real advantage with Emmerson and access to some proper inside knowledge. Plus, we got to help her too. And hopefully, reunite her with her mom."

"I seriously hope she gets her happy ending, she deserves it after everything that she's been through," Luc says and we get to the cars.

"Me too," Trick replies. "Let's get home. It's late, and my bed is calling me."

We got home late last night, too late to do anything other than snack if we were hungry, and then head straight up to bed. After a quick shower, I snuggled up to Atlas, and we promptly fell asleep.

As I bask in the warm cocoon of my bed, I know that I should probably get up and get going. Today is going to be a day full of catching up and trying to make plans for when Hunt does retaliate. The computer side of the tech team works really quickly, so I'm half expecting them to have already found a hint of Emmerson's mother. We're also expecting an update from Rylie by this evening just to give us an idea of how Emmerson is settling in and if Rylie has noticed anything suspicious.

That's not to mention the other updates we're waiting for, like the ones from Alaric and Jynx, to see if their various contacts have found any sign of Liam. I'm really beginning to think that he's dead, and that's how Hunt ended up with Amelia.

I know that I need to get up and face all of that, but I just want to carry on snuggling Atlas for a bit longer, and maybe get some naked time too, because, damn, am I horny.

As if he heard my thoughts, he pulls me closer, making me smile.

Chapter Seventeen

Atlas

I love waking up next to her, and I try to do it as often as possible without being a dick about it and hogging her attention. The only reason why this relationship of ours has worked for so long is because we aren't selfish with her, and we let her take the lead entirely.

All thoughts of how well our relationship works flee my mind the second that her fingers start to trace my tattoos, it's something that she loves to do and I can usually tell by the kind of pressure she's using whether it's a lazy tracing while she's distracted or if she's doing it because she wants something.

Her nails are practically digging in, a sure sign of what she wants. I growl as I roll over and pin her beneath me. I absolutely adore the way that she stares up at me with such heat and absolutely no fear. She trusts me one hundred percent, and I absolutely love that.

She has never been fearful of me, and that's why I love her as much as I do, and that's never going to change.

"Good morning, Princess," I mutter in her ear, making her shudder as I bite down on the lobe gently.

"Good morning my Atty," she replies, her voice already breathy.

I don't bother with any more words, and instead, I lower my lips to hers and kiss her deeply. Her legs wrap around my waist as her nails dig into my bare back, making me curse.

My hand smooths down her body, my fingers brushing against her nipple, making her back arch as she grinds against me. I make quick work of removing her underwear and my own as I kiss down her body, loving how responsive she is to me, my fingers part her slick folds, as I circle her clit before replacing my fingers with my tongue and sucking as I plunge two fingers inside her. She cries out in pleasure. She only lets me play for a short while longer before she tugs on my hair, bringing me back up her body as her

hand moves between us to grip my dick, and my lips encircle her nipple.

My whole body shudders as she moves her hand, applying just the right amount of pressure and driving me insane. While my mouth teases her nipple, my hand finds her clit again, and I pump my fingers into her entrance as my thumb rubs circles on her clit and her hands clench in my hair.

As I bite her nipple, I gently pinch her clit and she writhes beneath me as her orgasm rushes through her. I release her nipple with a pop as my fingers slow, helping her to ride out her release and move backwards so I can watch the ecstasy play out on her face; she is so fucking beautiful. I can't wait any longer, and I line my dick up at her entrance, her hips thrust up, catching me by surprise and making me groan in pleasure.

She meets me thrust for thrust, her lips kissing and biting my neck. We're not gentle, we never are, neither of us likes to be gentle in this situation, we also fight, and I fucking love it. I reach down and tweak her nipple, causing her to retaliate by biting down hard on my neck, making me growl as the pain pierces through me.

Fuck, I love her so damn much.

She starts to make those little moans, the ones that say she's getting close again, and I sit up so that she's lying on the bed still, and I'm kneeling, my hands holding her ass up as I change the angle and speed up, her eyes widen at the new sensations this change in position creates and I swear her eyes roll back in her head as her hands clench in the sheets and back arches even more.

I'm so fucking close, and I know she is, so using the grip on her ass, I pick up the pace and soon have both of us crying out as our orgasms roll through us, wave after wave of pleasure rolls through me before we both become lax, I hand her something to clean up with and then pull her into my arms, as we both catch our breath and just enjoy being together.

"I love you," she tells me softly, kissing the tattoo over my heart and making my heart jump.

I will never get tired of hearing her say that.

"I love you too," I reply, tilting her face up with my fingers under her chin so that I can kiss her.

We lay there for a while longer before she sighs, "We really should get up, we've got a lot of updates to get through today."

"And breakfast," I add with a smirk, as I watch her naked ass sway as she walks toward the bathroom.

She glances over her shoulder and catches where my gaze is, smirking and adding extra sway to her hips as she heads inside.

It takes me less than a few seconds to realise that I could be in the shower with her and even fewer seconds to get my naked ass up and stride in after her.

She grins from the shower, water running down her stunning body, “Took you long enough!”

“I was distracted,” I retort as I step in behind her, “we really need to install two shower heads in here.”

“I’ve been saying that for ages. I’ve just got no idea how to go about it.”

I smile, “I’ll see what I can do.”

She smiles like I’m the best person in the world simply because I’m going to get her another showerhead in here, which, to be honest, is purely selfish on my part because it means that when we shower like this, we don’t have to take it in turns to use the water.

Once we’re all done, we both get dressed in comfy clothes since I don’t think there’s much of a plan for today and then head downstairs.

“I smell bacon, I’ll race you!” Ever practically yells in her excitement and then takes off.

I race after her. Something in me likes chasing her, and she knows that, that much is evident from the look in her eye and the smirk on her face as she grabs the plate of bacon off the table and hoards it for herself.

“Work up an appetite this morning, then?” Jensen smirks.

Ever’s smile becomes decidedly dirty as she says, “You can bet your cute ass I did.”

Her response has all of us guys either smiling or laughing, and I honestly love it when she’s in this mood.

Her smile drops slightly into a frown as she pulls out her phone and looks at the screen before it widens again. We all watch her curiously because we’re nosey fuckers, and it quickly becomes apparent that it’s Jynx on the other end of the phone, they catch up for a bit before her expression switches to something a bit more serious, and she puts the phone on speakerphone so that the rest of us can hear.

“Guys, Jynx says she has a small update for us,” she announces quietly to those of us who aren’t watching her.

“Hey, guys,” Jynx greets us and we all reply before she continues, “Okay, so the update isn’t much and I’m sorry for that. D and I have both had our

feelers out asking various contacts if they'd seen Liam around at the moment, and no one has. All of their responses were conflicting; some of them are adamant he's dead, and some of them are certain that he's not, so I don't even have any solid information for you there either. D hasn't had much luck either."

I frown. In all honesty, it doesn't bother me whether we find him or not, he may not be the root of the worst of my trauma, but he certainly hasn't fucking helped, and he's always been absent, callous and uncaring, so why should I care about him?

"I don't think any of us expected any different really," Rage replies, but his gaze is on me, watching me closely.

He knows better than anyone else what it was like for me, he was there after all.

"D did have another idea though," Jynx says, and my eyebrows furrow as I hear the slight uncertainty in her voice.

"At this point, we'll try anything to find out where he is, not only because we need to know what he does, and he potentially has a lot of information for us about Hunt and Amelia's involvement with him. But also because we need to know if he's still a threat, a player on the board that we need to be aware of." Trick replies, and the rest of us all nod in agreement.

We haven't really done much where Liam is concerned, trusting that Alaric had it handled and that the organisation were keeping a look out for him if he resurfaced. Blake was the main threat and the main mastermind, which was made clear from what they found at his base of operations and various other evidence as well. Liam pretty much had zero control and had zero control for a long time. They knew that he had gone into hiding with Amelia because we told them he had, and he did just disappear. There is a part of me that wants to know what's happened to him and if he's okay, but I couldn't tell you why I want to know.

"What was D's idea?" Cash asks Jynx curiously, pulling me away from my thoughts and back into the conversation.

"Well, D made a good point. Liam has a soft spot for Ever, right? Even going so far as to check on her regularly?"

I tense slightly, my eyes narrowing along with everyone else's, apart from Ever of course who just looks curious.

"Yeah," Rafe replies cautiously.

"Well, why doesn't she try to call him. I know she's still got the number he

called her from last on her phone; she was told to keep it by Alaric. So, what could it hurt?" Jynx suggests.

Huh, it's actually not a bad idea and certainly doesn't put Ever in any danger, which is my main concern when anything to do with Liam comes up.

"Well, we actually hadn't thought of that," Riot admits for all of us.

"It's worth a shot," Ever replies, thinking over the suggestion. "I mean, at worst, he's not going to pick up, or since it's been a few years, the number will no longer work."

"You're right. We don't really have anything to lose," Luc replies.

"Alright, so we're all in agreement that Ever is going to give the number she has for Liam a call and see if she can get him to pick up?" Trick asks the group, and everyone nods.

"Great, well, that means that I need to get off the phone. I just wanted to let you guys know that we're on the way back to you. I've cleared up everything here and it's all running smoothly again. Sawyer and his team are more than happy to run things for a bit longer. We really want to help get Hunt out of the way. He's a threat to the main players in the criminal world as well." Jynx explains.

"Sounds good," Trick replies, and then looks at Ever as he adds, "we actually might need you if Lyric and the guys don't make a reappearance soon so that Quinn can put in his report and let us know what he knows about Hunt, which we're assuming is a lot since he was with him for a few years, if as I said they don't reappear soon we're going to have to go and get them, and that would be better if we have all of Lyric's besties to go in."

"In other words, you want Ever, Pete and me to go and explain the situation to them because a very pregnant Lyric is going to be less likely to murder us?" Jynx asks, and even I can hear the amusement in her voice.

My own amusement grows as Trick scrubs his hand over the back of his neck nervously and as he winces slightly until Ever bursts out laughing, and he relaxes knowing he's not actually in trouble.

"Don't worry, it's a good idea," Jynx tells him. "Let me know if Liam replies. I'll give you all a text when we're back. I rang Ace just before I rang you guys and I'm guessing he's been too lost in the bomb to do things like cleaning because there was a distinct edge of panic to his voice and he hung up pretty quickly."

Jensen chuckles, having been the only one of us down there and says, "Yeah, he's going to be panic cleaning."

“Thought so,” Jynx sighs, “alright, see you guys in a day or two.”

“Bye,” we all say together and then look at Ever.

“Do I call him now? or do I wait?” she asks with a slight frown.

“Well, you may as well call him now. There’s not much point in waiting.”
Rage replies.

“Okay, then,” she says, as she scrolls through the numbers on her phone and then finds the number that she’s looking for. She presses call and then another button that puts it on speakerphone so that we can hear it ringing.

The number hasn’t been disconnected then.

It rings twice, and then my father's voice comes through the phone, shocking us all, especially since it’s obvious to hear the concern in it.

“Ever? Are you okay?” he asks, and then shocking me further asks with the same amount of concern, “Are Atlas and Alaric okay?”

Ever is silent for a couple of minutes and rightly so, I think we all are. Clearing her throat, she replies, “Yes, we’re all fine. We’re looking for you, actually.”

Ever

I get straight to the point, one because I know that he appreciates that and responds better, but also because I have absolutely no idea how to deal with the concern in his tone. Concern that I didn’t expect to hear and that I know for a fact that Atlas didn’t expect to hear about Alaric and himself.

“Good, good,” Liam replies, his concern smoothing out. “How can I help you?”

“Amelia was shot, she’s dead. She was also strapped with a bomb and, from our research, had a close connection with Hunt, who is the one who had her killed.” I tell him bluntly, earning some raised eyebrows from all of the guys except for Rage and Atlas, although they still look slightly surprised.

It occurs to me that they haven’t really heard me talk to Liam, and it’s obvious from the way that I deal with him that I know how to handle him. For a long time, he was quite a regular part of my life, and I learned some tips and tricks during that time.

“I see,” he replies and then sighs, “I did warn her. I know that you most

likely hold some resentment toward your mother but you have to believe me that I did try and warn her.”

“How exactly did she end up with Hunt?” I question, deciding not to respond to any of the other observations that he very correctly made.

“You saved her after all, and we wouldn’t have expected you just to let her go,” Atlas adds, making a really good point.

When Liam replies, there’s a warmth and slight sadness in his voice that I instinctively know is for his son, and it once again has me questioning a lot of things.

“Hello, son.” When it becomes clear that Atlas isn’t going to reply, Liam continues, “I know that you all think that I am the epitome of evil, but I would never force someone to be with me if they didn’t want to. It became very clear over the years that Amelia used me as an escape and then got used to the kind of life I could provide for her, and I didn’t want to lose that. I loved her, I still do, but she never loved me.”

My eyebrows are in my hairline. I have no idea whether I believe that or how to respond to it if I do, because that’s a hell of a lot of information that he didn’t have to give us. In fact, he didn’t have to answer or he could’ve hung up when I said that I wanted to talk to him, and there would have been fuck all that we could’ve done about it apart from continue to call.

Thankfully, Trick doesn’t have the same problem, “So is that how she ended up with Hunt?”

Liam sighs again, “Yeah, pretty much. We run in similar circles, and at a meeting of sorts, she got chatting with him, realised how much money he had, and left me then and there. I tried to explain to her how it would end, and that he was more manic than even Blake, and more dangerous, considering that Hunt can hide it so well, but she wouldn’t listen. I actually haven’t heard anything from her in over a year.”

“Do you know where Hunt is?” Atlas asks his father, and although I doubt Liam would pick up on it I can hear the tension in his tone.

I need to make sure that I check on him after this phone call because this has got to be pushing some buttons for him. None of us want him to be triggered by Liam and if it even starts to hint at it, we’ll hand this case off to someone else.

Family is always more important.

Chapter Eighteen

None of us expect him to answer either way because he's already given us the information that he has on Amelia, and I think that was pushing it, if I'm honest.

Liam pauses, "I don't, not currently, but I have got some of my people watching him for business purposes, so I'll see if I can get their report early and see if they're aware of where he is or where he's going to be. I do know that they've lost track of him, and I'm assuming that's thanks to you."

"He's crossed us," Trick confirms vaguely.

"Poor fucker has got no chance." Liam surprises us again by saying. "I will let you know as soon as I do."

"Before you go," I say, and I know this isn't really the right time, but I also know that I may never get to ask him again.

"Yes?" he asks, the curiosity in his tone matching the looks on all of my men's faces.

"We know that Blake was actually the one that took Rylie, but why did you take credit?"

There's silence on the other end, and I really think he's not going to answer until he quietly speaks, "Two reasons. First, at that point, I still wanted to believe that Blake would realise how wrong he was and come around. But more importantly, he was going to kill her; he was going to do it graphically and leave her body for you to find. I knew that she meant a lot to you, and I couldn't allow that, so I pulled some strings."

He then promptly hangs up before I can even think of a response.

The room is silent.

"Alright, I'll say it," Jensen says into the quiet tension. "What the fuck just happened?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Rafe frowns.

"He's helping," Atlas says, the shock he was hiding now prominent in his

tone. “And from the sounds of it, he’s been helping right from the get fucking go. Do you believe what he said about Rylie?”

I shrug, “What reason does he have to lie?”

“None, really,” Atlas replies with a confused frown.

The room is silent again, and I honestly do believe him. which is something I’m not quite sure what to do with.

“And he fucking answered the phone super fucking quickly,” Rage points out, interrupting the silence with his shocked words before he then adds, “and he was concerned about Alaric and you.”

“Let’s hope he can succeed where everyone else has failed and find a decent lead on Hunt,” Riot says with a slight frown.

“What about the whole his people thing?” Cash asks.

“Well, it sounds like he’s started to build up his empire again. But if that’s true, he’s doing it very quietly to remain out of the spotlight of the organisation.” Atlas replies.

“And they’ve been actively looking for him, so he’s doing a damn good job of staying under the radar,” Jensen says.

“I better let Alaric know what’s going on,” Atlas says, getting up, before he leaves the room though, he stops by me and kisses the top of my head. When I look up at him, he says, “I’m okay. I’m shocked at his behavior, much like you are, but I’m not triggered or anything like that.”

I love that he knew what I was worrying about without me saying anything, and I can see the effect they have on the guys as well, as they immediately look more relaxed, the tension easing. They were worrying about it as well.

“Good, just promise me that you’ll let one of us know if that changes and you aren’t doing as well?” I ask him.

“I promise,” he replies honestly and then heads out of the room to call Alaric.

“I’ll send Jynx a message and let her know that D’s plan worked,” I tell everyone.

“Great. Well, let’s hope that Liam actually pulls through and gets us some information on Hunt’s whereabouts. We definitely need all the help we can get at this point.” Trick replies.

“So, what’s next? I know we’re all about the updates with everyone today,” Luc grins.

“First, we finish breakfast, and then I want to call Rylie and see how she’s

getting on with Emmerson,” Trick replies.

“I’ve got to get in contact with Zemi and the guys as well, we’ve been texting here and there, but it feels like it’s been ages since I actually spoke to them properly, and I still owe Zemi training sessions,” I tell them, the thought only having just occurred to me, I’m not going to lie I feel like a pretty shitty friend for not calling her sooner.

“Alright, sounds good.” Trick replies.

Halfway through breakfast, Atlas comes back in. Unsurprisingly, Alaric was just as shocked as we were, but Atlas said it was almost like he was holding something back like he wanted to say something but chose not to at the last minute. We’ll get to the bottom of it at some point, I’m sure, but it does make me curious. Alaric also warned us to stay cautious when it comes to Liam since there is a very good chance that he is playing us and has an ulterior motive. It’s nothing that we hadn’t already thought about, and of course, we’re going to be aware of things like that, it’s Liam.

The phone call with Rylie is anticlimactic in that she doesn’t really have much to say. In fact there’s nothing at all. All she can tell us is that Emmerson genuinely seems to be really relieved that she’s at headquarters and away from Hunt, like we’ve rescued her and that she is incredibly worried about her mother and what Hunt may do to her mother in Emmerson’s absence. This is all easy to understand because I’d feel the same; at the end of the day, Hunt has already proven himself too willing to torture her if Emmerson doesn’t do what he wants her to.

Honestly, the more that I learn about him, the more I want to end him and give him a bit of his own medicine on the way out, too. I’m a big fan of an eye for an eye. While we’re on the phone with Rylie using Trick’s phone, since it’s technically for an official reason, my phone pings with a text message, and I read it before smiling.

Interrupting their conversation, I say, “Heads up, Rylie, Pete apparently couldn’t wait any longer, and he’s already on the way in. Warn Emmerson again, he’s so freaking excited.”

The guys all start chuckling or smiling; we all know what Pete can get like in these circumstances, and if you don’t know him, then a warning is definitely needed.

“I don’t think we need to worry; she’s been asking for most of the morning when Pete’s going to come up. She’s been working on some stuff to show him,” Rylie chuckles, “I did ask her what, and she started to explain, but it

got far too complicated far too quickly, and I lost the ability to understand. I have a feeling that by the end of spending time with the two of them, I'm going to have a headache."

"Yeah, that sounds about right. Fortunately for the rest of us, he'll explain it in ways that we can understand." Trick replies.

"Great, good for you," she replies sarcastically before laughing, saying her goodbyes, and then we hang up.

Peter

I must have made it to headquarters faster than I ever have before. I'm excited because it is so rare that I get to talk to someone who is as fucking smart as she is. I mean, she's designed the bugs, and they are so much more complicated than we thought. They not only track and potentially kill whoever they're in, but they can also track the person's vitals and alert whoever has the control app, which means if someone is in distress or has a preexisting condition or anything like that, the bug can pick up on it before it becomes noticeable to the person which could potentially save their lives.

It's an incredible piece of tech and could be used to do a lot of good in the right hands.

I really do feel for her. She was a kid when she was first forced into this life, and she got found by the bad guys rather than the good. I can't even begin to imagine how difficult that must have been. I also think that it's admirable how she's managed to keep her sense of right and wrong, although I don't imagine that seeing her mother tortured by the man who is forcing her to build questionable things would've warped her morals by much. If anything, it would've solidified them.

I typically take my time walking through headquarters when I first arrive, usually stopping to get a coffee as well, but today, I don't bother. I want to talk to Emmerson. I make it through all of the security checks to get into the wing that I had no idea existed, and it's not until I get through the doors and start aimlessly wondering that I realise I have no idea where the fuck they are. I know that they're here. I at least thought far enough ahead to ask the agents at the security checks that.

“Peter!”

I hear my name being called and breathe a sigh of relief when I turn around and see Rylie and Emmerson walking down the hallway to meet me.

“Oh, thank the stars,” I exclaim, and then my mouth starts moving without me telling it to, as usual, “I was so excited to come and talk to Emmerson that I kind of forgot to ask anything about where you guys might be.”

Rylie chuckles as Emmerson grins, “Don’t worry. Ever already told me that you were on your way here, so we were keeping a look out for you.”

“Thank fuck,” I reply and then look at Emmerson, “Hey sweetie, I’m Peter, you were warned about my enthusiasm, right?”

Emmerson’s smile widens as her eyes sparkle with amusement, “Oh yeah, I was warned, but honestly, I think we’re going to do great.”

I smile broadly as I stride forward and thread my arm through hers as I turn us back the way Rylie and her have just come from. “So, where can we talk? I’ve got so many questions, and honestly, I was hoping that you could help with this issue that I’m having with the handheld device, to detect the bugs. I thought we had it nailed, and it was sent for the prototype to be made up, but it’s not working again now, and I just don’t know where I’m going wrong.”

Emmerson’s smile turns wicked, “That’s probably because the tech is adapting, so you find the solution, and it then changes its code so that it won’t work. Your design must’ve been pretty fucking through because only a few things can trigger that code.”

I stare at her, all of the questions I had before now doubling in quantity. She’s not just smart or even a genius; she is beyond that. To be designing things like that at this age is absolutely insane; in fact, it’s almost incomprehensible.

“Oh wow, I may not have known Peter for very long, but even I know that it’s rare for him to be shocked speechless,” Rylie comments as we move into a canteen with wide, comfy-looking booths and we head to the counter to get coffee.

Rylie’s words are enough to kick-start my brain again, “Wait, it only gets triggered at certain times?”

Emmerson nods, “Yeah, only when certain things are tried, almost like triggers. If they’re set off, then the tech will make the switch. Eventually, it would’ve run out of switches to make, but it would’ve taken a while.”

“Okay, I know I’m starting again, but that’s just, I mean, that’s crazily fucking impressive.”

Her cheeks tint pink slightly, “Thanks, I’m very proud of that one.” She frowns, “Well, apart from the deadly stuff that Hunt had me install.”

I frown as we take our seats, “Don’t worry, we’ll get him. We’re the best at what we do.”

“Peter’s right,” Rylie agrees, “you won’t ever have to work for him again.”

“I hope so,” she replies, not sounding completely convinced, and I don’t blame her at all. He’s been a massive part of her life, and to be finally free of him and his control would be an enormous relief and life-changing.

“Honestly, you know you are crazy smart, right?” I ask her, changing the subject since her smile has fallen.

She sips her coffee, a shy smile on her face as she replies, “Only in tech stuff, everything else, and I am dumber than the average person. I’ve never exactly found it easy to make friends or talk to people in general.”

I tilt my head as I smile and point out, “You’re doing a good job now.”

Her eyes widen slightly, and a slow smile appears on her face, “Huh, I guess I am.”

“Told you,” I tell her, “You just hadn’t met the right people yet.”

“That’s something Ever likes to say,” Rylie adds with a fond smile.

“I like her. She seems decent,” Emmerson comments.

“You have no idea. She’s one of the best people that I know,” I tell her honestly because Ever is.

The sheer amount of shit she has been through in her life would’ve warped or twisted anyone else, but she is strong, and she hasn’t let it change who she is. It makes me so incredibly proud of her.

“Is there any news on my mother?” Emmerson asks, changing the subject.

Rylie shakes her head, “Not yet, but our people are fast.”

“Thank you.” Her face becomes serious as she adds, “I am aware that since Hunt stopped letting me see her, the chances of her being alive still aren’t great.”

I nod solemnly, glad that she is aware of that possibility and we don’t have to be the ones that break it to her.

“I’m not going to lie to you, we are looking for Jane Doe’s as well, but we are all hoping that she is okay and we can reunite you,” Rylie promises her.

Emmerson nods, “To be honest, she’s been through so much that I just want her to find peace. If that’s in death, then at least I know that she isn’t struggling anymore.”

One thing is for certain, Emmerson is fucking strong. Not many people could look at a situation like that.

“That’s an interesting way to look at it,” Rylie says, and you can hear the impressed note in her voice.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” she says suddenly as she reaches into her jeans and hoodie pockets and starts pulling out loads of folded pieces of paper and putting them on the table between us. When she’s done, she smiles proudly and says, “I have more in my room, but this is what I could fit in my pockets.”

“That’s great,” I say and then add with a confused frown, “erm, what exactly are we looking at right now?”

She chuckles, “Oh, yeah, that might help. They’re the schematics for some of the things that I’ve made for Hunt. I’ve tried to remember as many as I can, and those are what I’ve got. I can give you access to absolutely everything as soon as I’m able to access a computer, although I realise that might be a while.” She starts to sort through the pieces of paper before she finds what she’s looking for and holds it up, “this should help you with the handheld device to detect the bugs.”

I look over it, and the solution is so simple and yet brilliant at the same time, “This is great, thank you. I’ll get it sent off to our tech team here, and they can get the prototype started.”

“Good,” she smiles.

It only takes me a few seconds to take pictures of the piece of paper that Emmerson handed to me and then text it and some extra details to the guys. It should only take us a couple of days to get it built, and in the testing stage, we’re putting a rush on everything.

We talk for a bit longer as she explains a couple of her designs and tech pieces. I can tell that she’s being careful about which ones that she picks to show us, and I know there are ones in there that she’s not proud of designing. Neither Rylie nor I have any desire to push her to explain it, not at this point, anyway. There will come a time pretty soon when she’s going to have to if she genuinely wants to help and wants our help. We work in a grey area here, and we always have, but at the same time, although threatened and coerced, she still made them, and we need her help in order to take them out of circulation and take Hunt down.

“So, just to clarify, you designed all of these, right?” Rylie asks.

“Yeah, they’re all mine,” she replies.

“And you can make them as well?”

Emmerson nods, “Yeah, that’s actually my favourite part. Building the designs and testing them. I then make any tweaks that need to be made, and that’s it.”

“That’s pretty cool,” Rylie replies.

“Thanks,” she tilts her head, “you guys know Quinn, right? he wasn’t just someone that you happened to come across and rescued at the same time as Rylie?”

I nod, figuring it doesn’t hurt to answer her honestly, “Yeah, we know him.”

“He used to come to the lab and help me build them; he’s crazy smart. He actually has a bug, but it’s like mine, so you don’t need to worry about Hunt being able to locate him. I can’t even do it. He’s the only one that has access to his chip, just like I’m the only one that has access to mine.”

Chapter Nineteen

Peter

“**Y**ou know, you nearly gave me a fucking heart attack then. I was about to call the calvary in and rush out of here,” I tell her, grasping my heart dramatically.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to, but I did think that you may be worrying about it.” She says.

“I don’t think any of us had actually thought about it properly, which is a massive lapse of judgment on our parts,” I admit, somewhat unwillingly, because seriously, how could we have not thought about that?

It would be a massive security breach. Hunt would know where we all live, and he could’ve quite easily told other people our homes and town would’ve been compromised, and we would’ve had absolutely no choice but to leave and find somewhere else to call home—starting from scratch to secure a town and all of that shit again. We couldn’t have risked not being one hundred percent safe, especially now that Lyric is having her baby; we can’t risk the baby or anyone for that matter. So we would have had no choice but to leave everything behind.

It would’ve been an absolute fucking disaster, and I’m going to have to put it out of my mind for the time being, or I’m going to start panicking about the what-ifs. I pull out my phone quickly and send a text message to fill Trick in before it occurs to one of them, and they start to panic.

“There is a really strong chance that Hunt knows that our chips are duds now. He’ll definitely know that Quinn’s chip is since he’s been gone longer than I have, and he’s going to be mad as fuck.” Emmerson interrupts my panicking thoughts.

“That’s okay. Angry people make mistakes, and we need him to make mistakes.” Rylie replies with a sharp smile. Her phone goes off in her lap, and she looks up apologetically, “I’m sorry to cut this short. I know you guys wanted to talk about more tech stuff that I have no hope of understanding, but

Mr R wants to speak to Emmerson about a few things.”

“That’s okay. I’ve got to head to the lab and see how the guys are getting on anyway. I’ll text Rylie when I’m heading home and see if you guys are free so I can come say goodbye.” I tell Emmerson as we stand up. I grab all of the pieces of paper that Emmerson emptied out on the table and stick them in my bag before we clear our table and then head out of the doors.

“I’ll keep you updated,” Rylie tells me as she and Emmerson move to go down a different hallway.

“Thanks, Rylie. See you guys later,” I call after them as I head in the direction of the lab.

The guys are going to be just as excited as I am to go over these designs, and it means that I can give some really good information to Ever and the others about what to expect and what to look out for when they go up against Hunt. Before I get lost in them and the new prototype with the guys, I need to call the others and let them know what we talked about.

The conversation doesn’t take very long at all, and by the time I get to the lab, I’m off the phone and completely free to focus on the sheets of papers in my hand that contain some ridiculously important information that’s going to be vital for helping us catch Hunt. I really hope that Mr R clears her to show us all that we need to know soon. I want to see her other designs, and I’m sure there are quite a few.

Ever

“Mr Rising just messaged; he’s just got done with the meeting with Emmerson,” Trick announces as he hobbles into the front room and takes a seat.

Fortunately, all of us are within hearing distance this time, so we don’t have to wait for anyone to arrive before we get the update.

“What did he say?” Atlas asks curiously.

“Emmerson appears to be just as keen as she was in interrogation last night to help. We know that she’s given Peter as many of her designs as she could remember off the top of her head, and Pete is in heaven with the other tech guys going through them. She’s also written a list of all the names that she

can remember of people who work with Hunt. Mr Rising is going through them and sending teams out to gather them up and put them into the facility that they've had prepared. They've gone through a lot of the files that Rylie managed to send to Ever when she was captured by Hunt. It matches up with the list of the names that Emmerson gave Mr R. The files contained a lot of information, and the things that Hunt has done to them are truly disturbing. They need massive amounts of therapy and a safe place in order to heal. It's also to keep everyone else safe from them. They're all incredibly well trained and therefore dangerous." Trick finishes explaining.

"I don't think they'll take that very well," Rage frowns.

"Or they could take it like Emmerson and just be grateful to be away from him and the torture," Cash points out.

"The facility has everything that they could possibly want, they can choose to look at it like a prison, but it's a fucking luxury one, and they have everything they could hope for while they heal their minds and most likely their bodies too." Trick adds.

"Eventually, they'll see that," I reply.

"Rylie is being sent out after some of the more dangerous members, ones that we know like to work alone." Trick adds. "Don't worry; she knows to call for backup if she needs it, but she's spent the last couple of jobs being a part of a team, and she's not used to it. I think she wants to get back to her normal."

"That makes complete sense, and I'm actually surprised that she's managed to stick to it for as long as she has," Luc replies.

"Not only that, but she was really good at being in a team. I think if she ever decided to work with other people, she wouldn't find it too much of an adjustment," I add. It's something that I've noticed while she's been around.

"Yeah, I agree. Although, I get the feeling it would take a pretty amazing team to convince her to switch it up and be a part of a team." Jensen says, always incredibly observant.

My phone pings with a message, and I glance down to see that it's from Zemi. She wants to know when we can do some more of her training. Apparently, Raiden is becoming damn grumpy and insufferable thanks to being bored because of his injuries, and she needs to let off some steam. I know that we don't have anything planned for tomorrow, so I text her back and say that we can meet at headquarters tomorrow and work through some stuff if she wants.

I know I could use a little bit of stress relief workout anyway.

“If it’s okay with everyone, I’m going to go to headquarters tomorrow to get some training in with Zemi,” I tell the guys, who have started to talk about something else entirely.

Jensen chuckles, “I just got a message from Wilder asking me to get all of the guys to come in because Saint and Raiden are driving them all crazy.”

“Yeah, I just got the same message,” Rafe chuckles, “I think he must be texting us all to make sure that we’re actually going to turn up.”

I chuckle as the others all make nods of confirmation or their phones go off with messages.

“I guess we’re all going to headquarters then,” Trick chuckles. “I want to catch up with Mr R anyway to see if he’s got any leads on Emmerson’s mom.”

“I could do with a good sparring match,” Atlas adds, and Rage nods in agreement.

“I can check in with Pete and Emmerson too. I also want to make sure that Rylie knows that if she needs backup with any of her pick-ups, to let me know. I know she’s used to working alone, but she doesn’t have to, and I want to make sure that she knows that.” I tell them.

I want to see how Emmerson is handling being at headquarters as well, and I also want to make sure that Pete is doing things like eating since I know that Emmerson gave him a lot of plans and designs to look over, so he’s going to be super absorbed in that for a while.

The following day, we get to headquarters fairly early and all scatter to meet different members of Zemi’s team and, in Trick’s case, to go and get an update with Mr R. I, of course, head for the coffee shop. That’s where Zemi and I like to meet when we’re both here.

“Hey!” I greet her happily and then thank her when I see that she’s already ordered me the coffee that I like. “How’s it going?” She sighs heavily, a groan escaping her, and I chuckle as I ask, “That bad, huh?”

“Dude, honestly, I didn’t think he could get much worse than he was at the

beginning, but he had his check-up the other day, and because he's outright refused to rest, it put more stress on the break, so he's going to have to keep his cast on for two more weeks than he thought and completely rest, so he's been a grumpy fucker since then. We fucking warned him."

I grimace, knowing full well how Trick would be if he didn't only have three weeks left with his cast. "I had the same conversation with Trick, and thankfully, he listened to us before he did more damage and had to spend longer in his cast."

"Lucky you," she replies, "it's because Raiden's a stubborn fucking ass."

"I'd love to give you some advice, but I genuinely don't have much. I mean, you could try and get naked or threaten not to flash him again unless he starts behaving, but since you guys aren't there yet, that won't work." I try to control my expression as I say this because I've never been quite so blunt with her before, but there have been hinted conversations and shared looks.

She brings her coffee to her lips, trying to hide her smirk, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure, you don't," I chuckle, rolling my eyes.

"Alright, I seriously need to get rid of some of this energy and fucking frustration. Honestly, at this point, I might flash him just to get him to stop fucking moaning for two damn minutes."

My eyes widen slightly as we both stand, and a massive grin crosses my face, "You have to. I can guarantee he won't be thinking about his leg. Although you might still not get any peace if he's within reaching distance of you. That boy is gone on you, they all fucking are."

Her smile is soft, as her cheeks tint pink, and she says quietly, "I hope so." Before she continues at a more normal volume, "I'm seriously considering it. Let's go spar."

"You've got it," I reply.

I really hope she shocks the shit out of Raiden and all of them, actually. I think they're all going to carry on ignoring what's going on around them and with them unless something big happens. Typically, it would be simple, if they weren't getting it, kiss them, then they'll know exactly where you fucking stand. The problem is that if she kisses one of them, someone else may think that means that she doesn't like them. They've been walking on eggshells around it for so long that doing something like that would confuse them all.

If she flashed Raiden to get him to shut the fuck up and quit wingeing in

the room of them all, that could start something. It's an idea, but only if she's comfortable enough to do it.

We spend a while sparring, and it quickly becomes apparent that she has been practicing; not only that, but it shows just how fed up she is with the Raiden situation. I hope my guys are talking some sense into him, Trick especially.

Trick and he are very similar, which is why they get on so well, because they understand each other. If anyone can understand exactly how Raiden's feeling and talk some sense into him, then it will be Trick, and if he can't, then I'll suggest someone smacks some sense into him.

We spar until we're both exhausted and have had a thoroughly good workout; as we're leaving the changing rooms having showered and now just feeling pleasantly achy from how hard we pushed ourselves, I realise just how much I appreciate her friendship.

"You're getting a lot better," I tell her with a smile. "You've been practicing."

She grins as she does a little hop and a skip before walking normally again, "Thanks. Zep and Wilder have been sparring with me, while Saint gives us some pointers. Usually, while we're avoiding a particularly grumpy Raiden."

I laugh, "Well, silver lining then because you have definitely improved. How is Saint getting on?"

"So much more patient than Raiden, but he is getting seriously fed up now. He can have his cast off in three weeks though, so he's at least got an end in sight, which I think is helping." Zemi replies.

"Yeah, in all honesty, I think that's why Trick and Cash are doing okay, although to be honest, Cash hasn't been any trouble at all," I reply.

"Lucky," she mutters with a smirk. She then becomes slightly more serious as she says, "The guys and I have actually been talking, and we were wondering if you'd like to come to ours next weekend for dinner?"

What she's asking is a huge deal; it's a big show of trust that she and the guys trust us so much to invite us to their home.

I smile, "We'd love to. I will have to double-check with Trick that we don't have anything pressing on, but I don't think we do."

She starts bouncing again, "Yey. Good, I'll let the guys know. Hopefully, it will be a good distraction for Raiden, or at least we'll have backup when he starts."

"Oh definitely, the guys will set him straight," I reply. I then add more

seriously, “Obviously, we understand what a big deal it is, so if you change your mind before next weekend, we completely understand, and we can do something else instead.”

She smiles, “Got it. You know, that’s what makes being friends with you guys so much easier than anyone else. You guys understand, and we never have to explain anything to you.”

“Exactly,” I reply, “Right, this is where I love you and leave you; I’ve got to go and check in on a few things before I head home.”

“Alright, I’ll message you the details. I’m going to go and find the guys.”

“Have fun.”

I quickly send a message to Pete to let him know that I’m on the way, and then make my way toward his lab before changing my mind and deciding that if I’m going to interrupt them, then I really should do it with coffee, they’re always more receptive if I bring them treats first, especially if I’ve interrupted them.

Thankfully, the barista in the coffee shop knows the guy's orders because other than Pete’s, I can’t remember. While I’m waiting for them to be made, I also text the guys to let them know what I’m doing and then text Rylie to see what she’s up to.

Rylie: I’m just about to head out to pick up a couple of people on the list. We’ve only picked up the ones that we know for a fact don’t have chips in them. Emmerson has a crazy good memory, and because she made the chips and put them into the people, she knows exactly how many there are and who has them. Apparently, Hunt only put them in his most valuable people. She says that she already has a design that can disable the chips entirely; it's like a scanner or something, but it disables it. I don’t understand, but Mr R has her working with Pete to build it so that they can equip the teams with them, and we can go after the more valuable people in his organisation too.

Me: Wow, that’s brilliant. Mr R trusts her, then?

Rylie: Well, at the moment it’s the case of the lesser evil. She is proving to be trustworthy, but obviously, we’re still being cautious. Pete is the best person to team her up with though, because he’s an exceptionally well-trained agent, and he understands what she’s doing, so she can’t trick him.

Me: Yeah, that’s true. I have a good feeling about her anyway.

Rylie: Me too. We’re slowly managing to whittle down his people, and the fewer people he has, the more he’s going to panic and hopefully make mistakes. Emmerson thinks she can have the devices built in the next couple

of days with Peter's help and then get them off to the teams.

Me: That's great news. Listen, I know that you're rounding people up solo, but if you need a hand or backup at any point, call and let me know.

Rylie: Thanks. I really appreciate the offer, and I will if I need to. I have to admit I'm really looking forward to doing it solo. Getting back to normal for me.

Me: Haha, I thought you might be, but I had to offer to make sure that you knew the offer was there.

Rylie: Thanks, I've got to go.

Chapter Twenty

Knowing that Emmerson is most likely with Pete, I take a risk and ask the barista to make me one more coffee and going for something reasonably generic since I have no idea what her order is. There's no point in my texting Pete to ask him because he's not replied to my other message yet, and I can only assume that it's because he's so absorbed in his work with Emmerson that he's not checking his phone, which means that he probably needs a break anyway.

Juggling the stack of coffees is slightly more challenging than I anticipated that it would be, but I manage it, and the guys lab isn't too far away.

When I get to the door though I'm faced with a problem, I have no spare hands to open the damn thing, and I hope that one of them is paying attention because I have to resort to kicking the door to try to get someone to answer it I end up doing it a couple of times before Scott opens the door with a frown on his face.

"Sorry, I couldn't open it," I tell him apologetically.

As soon as he realises it's me, and that one of the coffees is for him, he smiles, "Always happy to see you, are those for us?"

"Sure you are; you're just happy to have coffee. Can I come in? They're getting heavy, and we're pretty lucky that I didn't drop them on the way here," I grin.

"Oh shit yeah, sorry, my brain is a bit frazzled. I've been staring at a computer screen for who knows how long," he grimaces and opens the door wider, moving out of the way so that I can get inside and put the coffees down, far away from any of the electrical equipment.

"Hey, Ever," Hector greets me, helping himself to the coffee and taking a long sip, "thank you for this. We really needed it."

"Yeah, with all of the designs that Emmerson has given us, we've been going nonstop trying to make sense of them and also trying to put them into some kind of order of which we need to get built first, and which can be left. It was easier when we had her here to help, but then Mr R asked her and Pete

to sort out the device to disable the chips, so we lost them both.” Will adds.

“Yeah, Rylie said about that. Where is Pete?” I ask them, not really able to make much more of a contribution to their technical problem since I am less than useless when it comes to anything to do with technology.

“Next door, that lab is better equipped for them to actually make the device,” Hector replies with a knowing smile. They’re all more than aware of how bad I am with anything technical.

Smiling, I pick up the tray with three coffees in it and head back toward the door, calling over my shoulder, “Thanks, guys. Make sure you eat and rest, or I’ll come back.”

“Well, shit, that almost sounded like a threat, Ever,” Scott chuckles.

Just as I get to the door, I turn back around, “It was. Look after yourselves, please.”

“Damn, now I know why Peter is insistent. We rest and eat and shit when we’re working on projects,” Hector adds, and I just smirk.

I will come back to make sure that they’re okay.

Fortunately, I can open the door on the next lab since I’m not carrying as many coffees.

“Ever,” Pete greets me warmly as soon as I step through the door, and he takes the tray of coffees off me.

“Hey guys,” I greet them both, returning Emmerson’s warm smile. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t know what you wanted, so I just got you a caramel latte.”

“That’s perfect, thank you.” She smiles, taking the drink.

“How come you didn’t message saying you were coming for a visit?” Pete asks me, leaning against his desk and taking a sip.

I raise my eyebrow, “I did.”

“Whoops, I promise we have been taking breaks,” Pete replies immediately, making Emmerson chuckle.

“Good,” I reply, winking at Emmerson. “So, how’re you guys getting on? Rylie told me you were working on something that would disable the chips in Hunt’s close circle?”

Emmerson nods excitedly, “Yeah, we are. The lab here is absolutely amazing, and we should be able to build it quite quickly and test it just as quickly. Then we can get them out to the teams and Rylie since she is going after some of them by herself.”

“That’s great news!” I exclaim. I am genuinely impressed at how well she is handling everything that’s been thrown at her and that she genuinely wants

to help.

“Oh, and I forgot to mention to Trick that we’ve already got the prototype back for detecting the bugs,” Pete says, holding up a small device that easily fits in his hand.

“Wow, that was quick,” I reply.

“Well, the design was done; it was just that last tweak with the technical side of it that needed to be amended, and that took minutes once I knew what the problem was,” Peter explains.

“Ah, okay, that makes sense,” I reply.

I talk with them for a bit longer before I can tell that they’re both starting to get antsy and want to get back to work. It’s actually quite amusing how similar they are. Emmerson is basically the female version of Peter.

As I’m leaving, my phone goes off, and I turn back to Pete, “Mr R wants to see us before we go. Are you coming, or are you staying here?”

“I’ll stay here. I really want to get this done before I head home. I promised Elijah that I wouldn’t be too late tonight, so I’m running out of time.” Pete replies.

“Alright, I’ll call you later and fill you in.” I reply with a smile, “See you guys later don’t work too hard.”

“WE won’t,” they reply together, already having gone back to work on whatever it was they were working on before I turned up and interrupted them.

I leave the lab with a smile and take the various hallways and corridors to get to where Mr R’s office is located and where the guys said they’d meet me.

As per usual, I don’t bother knocking when I get there; instead, I just walk in with a massive smile on my face as I look at the room full of my men.

“Ever,” Mr R smiles, and I know for a fact that he doesn’t mind that I just walk in. I mean, I presume that if he did, he would ask me to stop, and he hasn’t yet, so until then, I will continue to barge in unannounced.

“Hey, Bossman,” I greet him and take a seat in the only spare one available that I assume has been left for me.

“Did Pete not want to come?” Trick asks me curiously.

“No, he’s fully in techy mode,” I smile. “I told him we’d fill him in later.”

“Good,” Mr R replies and then continues in a more serious tone as he switches to work mode. “Okay, so there are two reasons why I want to just touch base with you before you head home, and since I was already in a

meeting with Trick about other jobs, it seemed a good time to get you all in.”

“Sounds good,” Atlas replies for all of us.

“The first thing is that we have just, only a few minutes ago, found Emmerson’s mother. She was tortured and left for dead; she was barely alive, and we have no idea if she will make it. It was decided that until she is stable, we won’t let Emmerson know. I feel like it would be giving her false hope and then taking it away if her mother does die, and that will be harder for her to deal with.”

I frown, but I can see his logic, “I can see where you’re coming from. There’s already a part of her that thinks that her mother is dead, so giving her the hope of her being alive only to have that taken when she doesn’t survive makes sense. Either way, you do need to tell her as soon as you get the call from the hospital to say that her mother is stable. Emmerson deserves her happy ending.”

“I agree,” Mr R replies.

“What was the second thing that you wanted to mention?” Rage asks.

Mr R clears his throat, “I am aware that you have been worrying about the information that Quinn has and then the time scale that we’re working on. So, I wanted to let you know that he sent in a full and extensive report this morning. I have only begun to go over it, but due to the sensitive and very personal information in it, I will not be sharing it with you or anyone. If I come across a piece of information that will help you find and catch Hunt, I will, of course, share it with you, and if he decides to share what he experienced with you, then that is up to him.”

Trick nods and answers for all of us as he replies, “That is completely understandable. There is no need for us to be made aware of anything unless it’s going to help us with this case.”

Mr R nods in agreement, “Exactly. As you can imagine, since he was there for so long, the report is extensive, so I am slowly combing it for names, associates, and crimes that we can look into, and I have several agents and teams working on what I find as I find it. As I said before, if I find anything that can help you catch Hunt, then I will send it over.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Trick replies.

“I actually think that we’re more likely to get the most helpful information from Emmerson and her knowledge. We’re certainly going to be able to at least go up against some of Hunt’s weapons, and taking away some of his inner circle with the use of her invention that can disable the chips is going to

put him at a severe disadvantage too.” Jensen comments, and I admit that he makes a really good point.

“Good, stay in touch and keep me updated on the Liam front,” Mr R says, ending the conversation.

“We will,” Trick replies as he stands up, and we all follow suit.

On the way home, I start to wonder just how long it's really going to take us to find Hunt. We've had plenty of leads that are helping to take down the empire that he's built, but none of them are actually helping us to find him, and that's a problem. He's who we need to take off the board. His people are disposable and replaceable; he's already proven that multiple times. I mean, he shot his girlfriend, my mother, in order to prove a point. If that's not psychopathic behavior, I don't know what is.

Although we spent most of the day at headquarters, we still managed to get home with an hour or two before dinner, which Rafe is extremely excited about because it means that he can cook something that he's been thinking about for a while but that takes a few hours to prepare. With nothing else to do, I decide to head to my room, take a long shower, get into some comfy pyjamas, and then read. I'm hoping that the momentum for the case will mean that I can't read for a while, so I want to get some reading done now.

I've just come out of the shower, with a towel wrapped around me since I didn't bother to take any clothes in with me when my door opens, and in walks Riot.

He stops, shuts the door behind him, and looks me up and down with a smirk when he sees what I'm wearing. “Sorry to interrupt.”

I raise my eyebrow, “No, you're not.”

He shrugs, strides across the room in two strides, and tugs at the edge of the towel, watching as it drops to the floor; he pulls me in close, wrapping his arms around me as my nipples brush against his shirt.

“You're right, I'm not,” he finally replies, a hairsbreadth away from my lips before he closes the gap and kisses me thoroughly, his hands skimming my sides, brushing against the sides of my boobs and immediately making

me want more.

I tug on his shirt, my hands moving under his shirt, skimming over his abs, and lightly running my nails over them. He's far too dressed, considering that I'm naked, and I want to fix that as quickly as possible. His lips leave mine briefly as he rips his t-shirt over his head and then goes straight back to kissing me, my hands moving to his jeans and fumbling when I try to get them undone as quickly as possible.

He smirks against my lips as he gently bats my hands out of the way and does it himself, stepping out of them as his lips never leave mine as his hands skim my body, landing on my ass and gripping tightly as he pulls me against him, and I realise that he was going commando. My hands trail down his naked chest before I take his hard as steel length in my length and pump my hand, changing the pressure as I do and making him groan in pleasure.

One of his hands moves from my ass and around my hip, his fingers moving to find my soaked pussy, as his fingers circle my clit. He moves his hand so that his two middle fingers are pumping in and out of me, and the heel of his hand is applying the perfect amount of pressure on my clit; I grind against him, increasing the friction and making my nerve endings fire as I feel my orgasm build, and I increase the speed that I pump his dick.

He keeps in time with my movements as his other hand moves away from gripping my ass and skims up my side, skimming my boob before he tweaks my nipple. The slight pain, coupled with his pumping fingers, has me grinding down against the palm of his hand as my orgasm rips through me.

I'm still riding the aftershocks as he backs me up slightly so that I'm closer to the bed and then turns me around, pushing me down so that my ass is in the air, my pussy still quivering. He smacks my ass, making me groan before he thrusts inside me, gripping my hips in a bruising grip that has my need for him increasing even more and a second orgasm building already. One of his hands runs up and down my back, as he uses the grip of the other one to increase his speed, slamming into me. My back arches as I shift my own position, bringing my chest flat to the bed and my hands clenching in the sheets as this new position makes him go incredibly deeper.

He growls in pleasure behind me and reaches his hand that's not still grasping my hip up my back, threading through my still wet from the shower hair and gripping it tightly as he pulls my head back.

An unexpectedly strong orgasm crashes over me, making me cry out in pleasure as Riot's own groans of pleasure quickly follow, and our movements

slow before we both collapse on the bed, our breathing heavy and my legs like jelly. I have to admit that after cleaning up, I find myself easily ready for a nap.

“Nap?” I ask Riot sleepily.

“Absolutely,” he replies, sounding half asleep.

Since we’re lying across the end of the bed, we end up doing this weird shuffle thing to get us all the way back up to the top of the bed and under the covers. I don’t know about Riot, but I keep my eyes closed the entire time, and it does occur to me that if any of the guys walked in now, they’d wonder what the fuck was going on because it must look absolutely ridiculous.

As bad as it sounds, I don’t remember making it to the top of the bed, but I slowly wake up with my head on Riot’s chest and the duvet covering us both. That was a really good nap. Sometimes, I wake up from a nap and feel like I’ve been dragged through a hedge backward by a bunch of feral cats and have no idea what year we’re in, let alone anything else.

In other words, I end up waking up feeling worse than I did when I decided to take a nap.

Riot’s hand moves up and down my back, and I snuggle deeper into his chest, “Rafe just came in and said that dinner would be ready in about twenty minutes.”

My stomach, of course, chooses that moment to make itself known. I giggle, “I could definitely eat if you hadn’t guessed.”

Riot chuckles and then kisses the top of my head, “Come on then, let’s get dressed and see what he’s been working on. He was really excited about this recipe, so much so that he didn’t even suggest waking you up and going for round two. Although, admittedly, he looked torn.”

“I love it when you two wake me up for round two,” I reply as I slowly extract myself from Riot’s arms and then get up, stretching before I make my way over to my closet to pick out something reasonably comfortable to wear.

It takes us very little time to get dressed, and before we leave the room, I grab my phone off my bedside table and see if I have any message from Rylie

or Jynx. Jynx should be arriving in the next day or so unless they've gotten caught up with an emergency at home.

When I see a message from Lyric and then read what it says, I instantly stop in my tracks, causing Riot to turn back around and look at me curiously as he wonders why I suddenly stopped.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Is everything okay?” he asks me, concern lacing his tone.

I nod and start smiling as I type out a quick reply before I thread my arm through his and pull him quickly down the hallway. “Lyric and the guys are coming up for dinner!”

Riot stops, his eyes widening slightly as his grin slowly begins to grow, “No way, seriously?”

I nod rapidly. I can’t wait to see them; it’s been so fucking long. “Let’s go tell the guys. I know they’ve all been worrying.”

“Absolutely,” Riot replies, “Jensen is going to be over the moon to see Ezra.”

At the bottom of the stairs, something occurs to me, and I stop, making Riot stop with me, “Shit do you think that Rafe’s made enough food to feed them all?”

Riot gives me a raised eyebrow look, “Rafe always makes enough to feed an army, just in case we end up having extra guests, which we quite often do.”

I roll my eyes at myself as I start moving forward again, “I think I may just be excited; I know he does that.”

I let go of Riot’s hand at the doorway to the kitchen so that he can go and give Rafe some love and tell him that Lyric and the guys are coming up while I head into the extension where everyone else is sitting around and talking or reading so that I can tell them.

“Lyric and the guys are coming up for dinner; they’ll be here soon,” I exclaim excitedly, not waiting for anyone to stop talking or realise I’m there.

They all stare at me for a moment, so I walk over to Luc and plop my ass down on his lap while I wait for them to process.

“They’re all coming up?” Jensen asks, his knee bouncing.

“Yep,” I grin, “I really hope they’re all okay.”

“Me too,” Rage replies, “they had some heavy shit to work through.”

“Well, we’re going to find out soon,” Cash points out.

We're all worried about our extended family, and I hope they're coming up with good news. Lyric's text didn't really give anything away, just that she just asked if she could come up.

"Jynx and the guys are coming up as well," Trick says, and I sit up, making Luc grunt beneath me when I accidentally elbow him in the stomach. Turning around slightly, I grimace and then kiss him, "Sorry, I got a bit too excited then."

"Don't worry about it, Firecracker," he chuckles.

"Jynx said she'd tried to call you to let you know that they were back but couldn't get through, so Rome rang me," Trick smiles, "she said something about having a word with Ace and then coming up."

"Uh oh," I say, but the smile on my face says something entirely different from my words, "I guess he didn't manage to clear up all the mess he made while he was left alone."

"He went straight back to studying the bomb," Jensen says, and we all look at him to explain further, "he said that he might have found a lead with who could've designed it, but he needed to check a few things to see if he was right. Then he stopped replying, which tends to mean that he's gotten absorbed in his work. I have no idea if he found any link. I was going to head down to drag him out tomorrow anyway. I have a feeling that the chat Jynx is going to have with him is going to be more effective than any that I could have with him."

"Yeah, Jynx will put the fear of god into him," I chuckle.

"Alright, come and grab some dishes and help us lay the table," Rafe calls from the kitchen, and everyone gets up, clearing their stuff off the table so that it's ready to be laid.

We're just finishing laying the table when there's a commotion at the front door, and I quickly dump what I'm carrying onto the table and then race out of the room and down the hallway.

"Good evening," Jynx greets me with a massive grin, "look who I found outside!"

I pull a Lyric into my arms and give her a big hug as the guys all stream past us, heading further into the house and greeting the guys.

"Are you okay?" I ask her as I pull back and hold her at arm's length, "Is the baby okay? What about Quinn? What's going on there?"

Her smile is huge, and her eyes are full of hope; there's a lightness about her that she didn't have before, and that lets me know before she's even said

anything that everything with Quinn is okay. It also tells me that the situation with Quinn was weighing heavily on her and has been for a very long time, well, pretty much since I've known her.

"There's obviously a lot that we still need to talk about, but it's been amazing. We talked through some of the more urgent things that we needed to talk about, and then it was just like he slipped straight back into how it was before. He took me being pregnant incredibly well; in fact, he's crazily excited. He knows he needs therapy, and we've arranged that," she's full of hope, and then shadows cross her eyes, "he's been through some things that I can't even begin to understand, but he's home now, and we're all going to be there for him and help him through this."

"Wow," I reply, "and you are really okay? All of you?"

She nods with a soft smile, "I promise that we're okay."

"Thank fuck," Jynx replies.

"I'm so glad that you've got your whole family back," I tell her, pulling her in for a hug again.

"Me too," she mutters as she squeezes me back gently and then steps back, her eyes slightly misty. She rubs her bump with her hand and says, "Okay, enough of that. I can smell what Rafe has made, and we want it."

I chuckle and then thread my arm through hers as Jynx does the same on the other side, and we follow the noise into the extension. We're greeted by broad smiles from all of our men, and it makes me smile. The only people that we're missing are, of course, Pete and Elijah, Noel, Marty and Callen.

The conversation over dinner is deliberately kept light, and I'm pleased that Quinn has just happily slotted right in. He pauses every now and again to observe everyone's reactions to each other and just take it all in, a smile on his face that always widens when his gaze inevitably drifts back to Lyric, and it's so easy to see how much he loves her.

"I've got to say," Quinn says when there's a lull in the conversation. He smirks at Atlas, "I never thought I'd see the day when you weren't a grumpy bastard. I've gotten to know you better in the last hour than I did the whole time that we were working for you."

Atlas chuckles, "I'll give you that, I was standoffish, but you guys knew me, at least a small amount."

"Slight exaggeration," Quinn admits with a smile.

"So, what's been happening with jobs then?" Lyric asks, "Has Hunt popped back up?"

I think the rest of us were avoiding bringing Hunt up, just in case it triggered Quinn or he didn't want to hear anything about it, which, to be honest, would be entirely understandable, and how most people would be reacting to the situation. Since Lyric brought it up though, we reply honestly.

Trick looks at me briefly, and I nod, "He made his presence known at a meal we had a couple of days after we got Rylie and Quinn out. We went to that restaurant we like in the city and well . . ."

Trick pauses, and all my guys and Jynx and hers look at me, causing Lyric and her men to look at me too.

Lyric's face instantly becomes serious as she sits forward in her seat and asks, "What the fuck happened? Everleigh?"

"Oh, she full named you," Jynx mutters, her eyebrows raised.

"My mother walked in with a bomb strapped to her, gave us a message from Hunt, and then got shot in the head via sniper. Ace diffused the bomb and has been trying to identify the maker so that we can take them out of Hunt's arsenal, considering he clearly likes blowing shit up." I sum up and then take a big bite of food because I have no idea what to do, and they're all still staring at me.

"Fuck," Ezra mutters, as he reaches his hand out to me and squeezes mine, "I know things were weird with your mom, but I'm still really sorry."

"No one should have to witness their parents being killed in front of them," Quinn says quietly, his eyes on me. I incline my head slightly, and he adds with a tiny tick of his lips, "Even if they were raging dicks in life, having them killed in front of you just makes all the feelings that much more confusing."

"That's exactly it," I tell him.

"I know," he smiles. "Hunt's a sadistic bastard, and I wish you could've dealt with your mother passing in a normal way."

His words may not make sense to many people, but they do to me, and I know that he's speaking from experience. It's pretty evident that Quinn has had a hard life.

"Oh no," Rip suddenly says, and I glance over to where he's looking.

Immediately, I get up and rush over to Lyric, "Why are you crying?"

"Because, of stupid hormones, I'm fucking angry," she practically spits.

I take a step away so I can look at her properly and smile, "Okay, that's not as bad as I thought then."

I try desperately to hold in my laughter as her men slowly start to move

anything that can be used as a weapon away from her.

She rolls her eyes, “Seriously, guys, that was one time.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Jynx interrupts with her eyes sparkling, “hold the fuck up, story time?”

“I may have gotten mad enough at dinner once to throw one of the steak knives; it wasn’t at anyone, and it’s not important right now,” she says firmly, which has everyone around the table smirking or outright smiling. Turning back to me, she adds, “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you.”

“You had more important shit to deal with, and we can talk about it more later. Honestly, though, I’m okay.”

She studies me closely for a few minutes and then says, “Okay, that’s fine, we’ll talk later.”

Sensing my need not to talk about this any longer, Jonah asks, “So, what happened after that? Are there any leads?”

Before any of us can fill them all in on what’s been happening though, Quinn interrupts, looking at Ace, “Hold on a second, you’ve got one of Hunt’s bombs?”

Ace nods and lets out a frustrated sigh, “Yeah, like Ever said, I’m trying to identify the maker so that we can take another important member of Hunt’s inner circle away from him.”

“I know the guy. I was with Hunt long enough that he thought he had convinced me to turn, right up until the very end when I realised who Rylie was and showed Hunt how I really felt. Anyway, because of that, he was sharing things with me, and I even went with him to the guy's place.” Quinn replies.

Ace sits forward excitedly, “No shit. Really? What’s his name?”

Quinn reels off the guy's name and his last known location to Ace.

Ace frowns, “I’ve never heard of him, and I thought I knew most people in the explosives world.”

“He’s not in it, that’s why. He has serious skills but didn’t have much choice apart from to do what Hunt asked of him.”

“Like Emmerson,” I mutter.

Quinn’s gaze snaps in my direction as he frowns heavily, “Emmerson? She had no choice either.”

I smile reassuringly, “We know, we’ve got her at headquarters, she’s safe, and she’s actually being extremely helpful in giving us the designs that she’s done for Hunt. She’s a damn genius, and it's really impressive. Rylie is

staying with her while she does some jobs.”

Quinn deflates slightly, “Thank fuck. She’s like my little sister. I’ve tried to protect her from what I could, but that’s pretty much impossible in Hunt’s world.”

“She’s awesome,” I reply honestly. I really do like Emmerson. She’s good people.

“Mr R has people trying to locate her mother as well,” Atlas tells him.

“Good, although I’m not sure they’ll find her alive. Fortunately, Emmerson has a good head on her shoulders, and she understands that’s a possibility.”

“I’ve just messaged Mr R all the details that Quinn just gave us. He’s sending Rylie out to grab him, and I also made sure to tell him that he was forced into the situation like Emmerson was. He’ll be taken to the retreat to be protected and so he can most likely start to heal from trauma,” Trick announces, putting his phone down.

“I wouldn’t take him anywhere that you want to remain off of Hunt’s radar; he’ll have a chip in him,” Quinn says with urgency.

“Pete and Emmerson have the handheld prototype built and ready for Rylie to take with her to see if he has got a chip, and Emmerson has made something that destroys the signal permanently or something,” Trick starts to explain, “she said it’s really rudimentary, and she isn’t happy with it, but it will do the job and stop the chip from transmitting.”

Quinn chuckles, “Yeah, that sounds like her.”

After Trick has filled them all in on the particulars of the case that we can share, we all talk for a bit longer, laughter flowing easily, and I’m surprised to see that Quinn actually fits in more with Jensen, Ezra, and Ace rather than the more serious people and when he gets a bit more comfortable, he becomes absolutely hilarious, and I haven’t laughed that hard in ages.

“One more serious thing,” Dom starts, his eyes on Trick as the rest of the table quiets so we can hear.

“Sure, man, shoot,” Trick replies with an easy going smile.

“Obviously, we’ve been away from our usual jobs for a while now, and although our various employees have done really well holding down the fort, there is a lot that needs to be gone through and sorted out,” Dom starts.

“Not only that, but we also need some time to be a family and get back to some sort of normalcy at a slower pace,” Creed adds with a smile.

“What they’re trying to get it in the most confusing roundabout kind of way,” Ezra starts giving his friends a what the fuck are you doing kind of

look that makes me giggle before he adds, “What they’re trying to say is that we want to take a step back from cases for a while until we’ve sorted the town out and caught up with our jobs and made sure that our family is as stable as it can be, we’ve got years to catch up on and jobs take a lot of time and stress.”

“They’re also worried about me because finding out Quinn was actually alive and kidnapped all these years was so stressful. They’re worried about the stress I normally feel when they go away on jobs,” Lyric adds with a smile.

“Rightly so,” Jynx interrupts, “I’d be mad if they weren’t.”

“As far as I’m concerned, you need to be the most chilled-out and relaxed person for the rest of your pregnancy,” I add firmly.

“Obviously, that’s no problem at all. You guys take all the time that you need, and we’ll adjust the workload and all of that sort of thing. We’ve been doing it for the last few weeks anyway, so it’s not going to be too much trouble. We can just carry on as we are. Family always comes first, guys, you know that.” Trick replies like it’s a no-brainer and honestly, it is.

“They’ve got us for this Hunt shit anyway,” Malachi tells them, “so they aren’t going to be left short for this case.”

“Good,” Lucien replies with a smile and then adds more seriously, “if you need any of us at any point, we’re happy to help still. We just don’t want to be in the regular rotation for a while.”

Trick nods, “That’s understandable. We’ll try to keep you out of it unless it’s absolutely necessary. If it gets to a point where some of you want to be involved a bit more regularly and some of you don’t, just let me know, and I can work it out and work it to fit you guys.”

“Thanks Trick,” Dominic grins, “best boss ever.”

I get it; I really do. I think if I were in their situation, I would be wanting to do the same as they are. Their family needs to be strong and settled, especially since there’s a baby on the way, and they’re in the unique position that they have other jobs bringing money in, and they don’t need to be working on jobs with us. They only have to do it if they want to. It’s another thing that I love about our job: we have a lot of freedom, and even if we couldn’t do any jobs for a while, not only would Mr R be absolutely fine with it, but thanks to Jensen’s investing, we don’t actually need to work at all.

We don’t do what we do for the money, which is extremely good, thanks to the add-ons like danger pay. We do it because we love it. I know that Lyric

and the others love what they do in the town as well, and they already have well established jobs with people who rely on them, so I think it will be interesting to see which of them want to come back to doing jobs after they've had some time off and especially when their baby is here.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was so nice catching up with Lyric and the guys, and I'm so glad that Jynx managed to make it back in time to see her as well. Although, I am slightly concerned about Pete's reaction when he realises that he missed out on the dinner last night. In fact, I'm not going to tell him Jynx can, or better yet, Lyric can, since she's the one that sprung it on everyone.

Jynx and I both made her promise that she would stay in better contact and that even though she's not working for a while, we still do family nights and keep updated with each other, and honestly, she just looked at us like we were crazy, and said of fucking course, what did you think I was going to do. So that was the end of that conversation.

"Guys!" I hear Atlas shouting and immediately make my way into the extension, everyone else following behind as his tone sounds urgent.

"What's up?" Rage asks, taking a seat at the table with his coffee.

"Liam's asked us to call him, he's got an update," Atlas says as he looks down at his phone.

"Already?" Luc asks, "That was quick."

"Alright, dial and put it on speaker, let's see what he's managed to find," Trick says as Atlas does as he says.

"I assume I'm on speaker?" Liam's familiar voice comes over the phone as he picks up on only the second ring.

"Yeah, you are. Atlas said you've managed to find something?" Rage replies.

Liam clears his throat, "So, my people have had trouble locating Hunt he's gone to ground, you guys must have actually managed to instill some fear into him which is impressive. We have managed to find out that he's going to be at a charity work event on Friday evening, it's held by one of his company's and he never fails to attend as he has a lot of investors in attendance that he needs to get more money out of. It's a black tie event, with dinner and you have to buy the plate."

"Like the ones we used to do?" Atlas asks.

“Yes, very similar. I have managed to secure invites for you all but you will need to buy the plates. I have to warn you that they aren’t cheap,” Liam replies.

“So, this event is full of business associates?” Trick asks.

“Yes and potential business associates as well,” Liam replies. “There will be all sorts of people there, with all sorts of agendas.”

“Understood,” Trick replies.

“Will you be in attendance?” I ask him curiously.

“Not this time, it brings up bad memories from the last time that I attended,” Liam replies and I wonder if it was at this event that Amelia met Hunt and left Liam.

“Great, thanks for your help Liam,” Trick replies, and then adds, “Let us know if you find out anything else.”

“Will do, I’ve got a few contacts looking into where his base of operations may be, I want him out of the way as much as you do. I’ll send all the details over to Atlas’s phone now,” Liam replies, and in what I’m coming to associate as typical Liam, promptly hangs up without saying goodbye.

“How reliable do you think this information is?” Cash asks. “Also, how did he know Atlas’s phone number?”

“I haven’t changed my number,” Atlas replies, and then frowns, “I probably should have.”

“I didn’t change mine either,” I reply.

“I’ll get in contact with Mr R and let him know the update, and also see if Emmerson has a spare handheld detector just in case,” Trick suggests, as he starts dialling, and gets up to leave the room so he can talk to Mr R.

“You should probably call Alaric, he’s going to want to know. Not only because it has something to do with Hunt, but also because Liam came through and actually gave us a lead,” Riot suggests.

“Yeah, that’s a good point,” Atlas replies with a frown on his face and I know he’s finding it difficult to comprehend how helpful Liam is behaving. He gets up to leave the room to talk to Alaric just like Trick did.

To be honest, I think we’re all curious about why exactly Liam is being so helpful at the moment, and I think that there’s a high chance that he’s doing it for his own agenda, I mean it’s Liam, but sometimes when he talks especially to Atlas I swear I can detect a sadness in his tone and I don’t know what to do with that. It’s not what I expected and not how you would think that he would act, so it’s just confusing as hell.

I suddenly sit up straighter, as something occurs to me and a thread of mild panic goes through me. I'm aware that the guys who are still in the room are looking at me in question but I literally have a one track mind right now and I pull out my phone dialling.

“Hey sugar,” Pete greets me happily, “are you . . .”

I don't let him get any more words out, as I also decide to take this opportunity to tell him about last night too, “Lyric and the guys came up last night at last minute, they're all good really cute, I'll fill you in properly but I have a slight panic on, we've got a charity event to go to on Friday, that's black tie and supposedly where Hunt is going to be and I don't have a clue how to dress.”

There's a moment of silence before I hear Pete take a deep breath, “Alright that's a lot to process. Lyric already called me and told me, we had a really good talk and I promised to make sure I was there for the next family meal. Although I love the fact that you tried to slip that into the conversation in the hopes that I wouldn't notice.”

I clear my throat, as Cash, who is sitting close to me and can clearly hear Pete, smirks, as I say, “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Sure you don't,” Pete's amused voice comes from the other end of the phone, he starts chuckling as I grumble and then suddenly it cuts off. “Wait a fucking minute you need a evening dress by this even which is on Friday?”

I wince, “Yes.”

“Ever, you better mean next Friday, or even better Friday two weeks from now,” when I stay silent he adds, “woman, tell me you mean next Friday!”

“I erm can't,” I reply.

What he says next is an impressive string of curse words, some that are so inventive I end up chuckling which clearly doesn't help the situation, but I can't help it.

Finally, he stops and seems to get a grip on it as he says, “Alright, can do this. It means I have one day to find you something and I'm going to have to call in some favours but I can definitely do it.”

“You're a lifesaver,” I reply, my panic over what to wear lessening slightly.

“I know,” he replies warmly. “I take it this is an official event?”

“Yes,” I reply.

“Okay, hopefully I can find some sort of social media presence from past years and then I can see what sort of evening gowns are expected so I don't

over or underdress you. Do you have the details for the event yet?" he asks me.

"No, not yet but Liam should be sending them through now, Atlas is on the phone giving an update to Alaric though," I reply.

"Liam," Pete says, surprise in his tone, "he came through?"

"Oh yeah, he has been surprisingly helpful, depending on what information he actually gives us," I reply.

"Start from the beginning, tell me what's going on, and if you need any tech support," Pete says, his voice switching from nervous excitement about getting me a dress, and most likely sorting the other guys out as well, to a more serious work and tech kind of voice.

Thankfully, it doesn't take me that long to catch him up on what happened and what was said, I end my explanation with, "I'm not sure if we need you yet we're waiting for the information to come through, but if you want to do some field work then obviously we want you with us, that is the whole point of how you're working now. you've got a lot of flexibility."

"That's true, I'll see how Emmerson is getting on and then let you know when I bring your dress up tomorrow," Pete replies.

"Sounds good to me," I say and then add, "Trick's on the phone to Mr R at the moment and I think he's going to ask Emmerson if she's got anything to help in case we do manage to capture Hunt or someone else of interest who works with Hunt."

"Okay, that's great, we've nearly finished a second handheld bug detector so we can get that done and out to you no problem. Rylie is still out, Mr R sent her after someone else that Quinn recommended we find."

"Yeah, that was the bomb maker, he knew his name and last known location, I'm not surprised that Mr R decided to send Rylie after him. Like Emmerson he didn't have much say in the matter when it came to working with Hunt but he is still extremely dangerous, and if anyone can handle him it will be Rylie."

"Exactly," Pete replies, "by the way, I have hung out with Rylie quite a bit in the last few days and she's awesome. I can see why you guys got on so well."

I smile, "I'm glad you like her, I'm hoping she's going to stick around to a certain extent now, although I know that she's going to want to still do her own thing and obviously that's fine, I hope that she still checks in every now and then and we catch up."

“I don’t think that will be an issue, she’s clearly missed you guys,” Pete replies.

“Good,” I reply somewhat vaguely as I watch Trick and Atlas walk back in the room, “the guys are back from their calls, I’ll call you with an update in a minute.”

“Got it,” Pete replies, “I’ll start looking for your dress, love ya.”

“Love ya,” I reply.

“Pete?” Atlas asks with a smile as he walks over and picks me up effortlessly before settling himself in my chair with me on his lap as he holds me tightly.

I have a feeling that he needs just a bit of reassurance after all the curve balls that Liam is throwing at us at the moment and honestly, I can’t blame him and I’m happy to be his comfort. I trust that if he wants to talk about it, or truly starts struggling that he’ll tell one of us. I don’t particularly care who he talks to so long as it’s someone and he doesn’t hold it in or suffer in silence.

“Yeah, I realised I have nothing to wear and filled him in on what was happening, he might come with depending on the situation with Emmerson,” I reply.

Trick nods, “Good, we can catch up with him once we’ve finalised everything and then he can tell us where he stands with it all. Mr R is now all caught up, and he’s speaking to Emmerson and will call us back when he has any more information for us.”

“Alaric was surprised that Liam actually came through for us and since it is a lead from Liam and we have no idea if it can be trusted or if it’s reliable, he’d like to be involved.” Atlas replies.

“That should be easy enough to figure out,” Trick replies, “actually, he can keep me company in the surveillance van. There’s no point me attending in case something happens, Cash will be okay because it’s his arm and he can still shoot without trying to juggle crutches.”

“Plus, if a fight breaks out the rest of us can cover him well enough that he should be okay.” Rafe adds.

“This is a public event though, so the chance of Hunt endangering all of those people, especially people that invest in his companies is pretty slim,” Jensen points out, and it’s a reasonable point to make, it would be like biting the hand that feeds you, if he got rid of all of the people that help make him successful.

“Liam already sent through the information, but it was a link to a file, have we got one of the secure laptops down here?” Atlas asks, as he shifts me so he can pull his phone out of his pocket.

“Yeah, one second,” Rage says as he gets up and heads to the front room, bringing back one of the secured laptops that we have to hand, just in case of situations like this and if we don’t have Pete with us. His laptop is the most secure out of all of them.

Atlas presses a few buttons on his phone and then opens up the email on the computer, logging in to his account and clicking on the file he’s just sent himself.

“Okay, so it seems pretty straight forward, although there’s a lot of information in here, I think he’s included all of the surveillance footage and information. There are text messages between Hunt and someone else, confirming that he’s going to be there.” Atlas tells us sounding impressed.

“He’s got all of the tickets in our names,” I point out since I can see the screen.

“There probably wouldn’t have been any point in trying to use fake names anyway,” Jensen says, “he’ll have high tech security there that will mean that we’d get recognised the second that we come in sight of the building.”

I frown, “So what’s the point in us going if he’s going to know that we’re going to be there?”

“Ego,” Rage suggests, “on his part, that is. Not only that, but it’s an extremely public event with a lot of innocent civilians, not only that but Hunt is extremely popular with the public, and we want to take him down as quietly as possible so he fades from the public's memory otherwise everything becomes a lot more complicated because all eyes will be on what’s going on, it would get world wide news coverage and that’s the last thing that we need.”

Atlas nods, “I see what you’re getting at, he would think that we’re not going to do anything while in such a public setting, and clearly underestimates us if he thinks he could get away from the event without us capturing him again.”

“Either way, if he’s not there then hopefully we can still get some sort of lead,” Luc mutters.

To be honest we’re all getting fed up with the fake leads now. I’m starting to think that it’s going to be a never-ending job, and turn into one of those cases where the leads are few and far between and we end up chasing him for

years.

Please don't let it end up being like that.

I want justice for all of his victims, including my mother. She's made some mistakes, and I don't consider her my mother in any true sense of the word, but she obviously had feelings for Hunt and he strapped her with a bomb and sent her to die. Whether she knew that was the end for her or not, no one deserves to die like that. I especially want all of those people that he's bribed and black mailed, people that didn't know what they were getting into and didn't realise until it was too late. I've seen the shadows in Quinn's eyes and I can only imagine what a sadistic fucker like Hunt put him, and others like him through.

It's one of those times when I really appreciate the kind of organisation that I work for, they're not immediately imprisoning the people that they know were working for Hunt under duress, they're trying to help them first. There will of course be some kind of consequences for what they have done, but they are getting the help that they deserve to have.

"Are we sure that Hunt isn't going to lose his shit considering that we've taken two of his most important people away from him and most likely by the time that we get to the charity event, Rylie will have gotten his bomb maker too," I ask.

They all look at me before Jensen says, "Yeah, you have a point but we're going in prepared. We have Jynx and the guys for back up, we have Alaric in the surveillance van with Trick, and then there's us. We haven't got the reputation that we have for no reason."

"He's right," Rafe agrees, "and if we decide that we need more back up we can always request for Zemi and the guys to be on call as well."

"Yeah, that's actually a good idea." Trick muses, "Maybe we should put them on standby anyway. Elijah and the guys requested another short job, I think they're all enjoying the more straightforward ones. They don't go out until Monday, but since they've been doing jobs so often lately I don't want to involve them unless I have to."

"Also, Marty and Noel are busy on Friday," I add with a huge smile, and their eyebrows rise, clearly getting what I'm talking about.

"Noel messaged me about that," Cash smiles happily.

"I'm glad that they've finally sorted their shit out," Atty mutters, "or at least they're trying."

"Alright, so we've got a rough plan. We can go over the details a bit more

tomorrow,” Trick starts only to get interrupted by the loud ringing of the phone.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“It’s Pete,” Trick says with a frown before he answers and puts it on speakerphone. “Hey man, what’s up?”

“Hey, I’m sorry to call. I know you guys are trying to sort out the job and make a plan. I just had a couple of things I wanted to run by you. One, I will come on Friday to the job if that’s still okay. Emmerson and I have a couple of new tech designs that should be able to help, but you’ll need me there in case something goes wrong with them,” Pete starts to explain.

“That’s great, man, it will be good to have you with us,” Riot exclaims with a smile.

“I would ask you to explain to us now the new tech you’ve got, but the majority of us learn by seeing, so you’d only end up having to tell us again when we see you,” Jensen adds with a slight chuckle of his own.

Peter knows us all well enough that with amusement in his tone, he answers, “Don’t worry, I wasn’t planning on telling you now. I’m coming over tomorrow evening with Ever’s dress and your suits as well, so I’ll bring them then and explain how to use them and what they do as well. You’ll have the necklaces, or Ever will. We haven’t designed a version that wouldn’t stand out for a man yet.”

“I don’t mind wearing a necklace,” Jensen interrupts with a confused frown.

“Yeah, I know, but it’s a really feminine design, and because of that reason alone, it will get noticed. We need it not to be studied too closely,” Pete replies.

“Oh, I get you. Okay, that makes more sense.” Jensen replies.

“What was your second question?” Atlas asks, trying to get us back on track since we’ve once again got distracted, which is pretty typical for us.

“Oh, could you send me the information through? I’m on such a tight timeline. I’ve got a couple of places in the city opening early for me tomorrow morning, but I need to get some research done first,” he replies, excitement in his tone. “Oh, and what’s the event called?”

“I’ll send the information to you now, and one second, I can’t quite remember the name,” Atlas answers, since he already opened the file and can email it directly to Pete’s secured email.

“No worries,” Pete replies.

“Here it is, so it’s been thrown by Hunt’s main company, and it’s called Hope’s Relief,” Atty tells him.

“Say that again?” Pete says, his voice sounding slightly tense. Atlas quickly reels off the name again, and Pete curses.

“What’s going on?” Trick demands because there is very obviously something going on.

“My dads are invited to that event. It’s a big deal to get invited to in the corporate world, and it’s the first year that they’ve been invited. Dad is really excited about it, he was talking about it on our last phone call,” Peter explains.

“Shit,” I mutter, “that can’t be a coincidence, surely?”

Rage shakes his head, “I highly doubt that. I’d be willing to bet that Hunt has done his research, and there’s a reason why he’s chosen to invite your parents.”

“I agree, especially since they haven’t been invited before,” Atlas adds.

“Call them and see if you can get them to cancel,” Trick orders, concern in his tone. “We can’t risk them. I wouldn’t put it past Hunt to do something to them just to prove that he can and also because he’s on a warpath because of us taking Quinn and Emmerson, not to mention Rylie when we actually almost managed to catch him.”

“I’ll call them now,” Pete replies urgently, and before he hangs up, he asks, “How much can I tell them? My dad is really excited about being invited. He says it’s one of the biggest business events of the year, and it actually got him to talk about something other than the engagement part that they’re planning for Elijah and me. What I’m trying to say is that it’s going to take a bit to convince him not to go.”

Trick frowns worriedly before he says, “Tell them whatever you need to in order to get them not to go. We can’t risk anything happening to them just because we need to keep certain things quiet.”

“Got it,” Pete replies, “thanks man.”

“Let us know what they say and if we need to make a plan to cover them as well.”

“Will do,” Pete replies and then promptly hangs up.

“I really hope that he can get them to listen to him,” I say, chewing my lip nervously.

“They’re not foolhardy, they’ll listen. It’s obvious to hear the worry in Pete’s voice, and they know that he wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important, especially knowing that they’re looking forward to it,” Rafe reminds me.

He’s right. There’s only a slim chance that Pete will even need to spill any of the beans about us and what we do. Of course, they know that we’re in some kind of law enforcement and that it’s slightly different than the typical law enforcement that they’re used to, but we keep everything very vague, more so for their safety than ours.

“I’ve messaged Jynx to fill her in on what’s going on, and she and the guys will be up tomorrow morning to help us figure out the exact plan,” Atty announces as he looks down at his phone.

“Great, good thinking,” Trick replies, “they know that they won’t be at the event since Liam has only got tickets for us?”

Atlas nods, “Yeah, they’re happy with that. Rome mentioned that they’ll just spread themselves out around the area just in case.”

“That’s a good idea, but I am wondering if we can get them in as waitstaff or something, or at least a couple of them,” Trick muses.

“That’s a good idea and not something that Hunt would necessarily expect. He seems to be more focused on us than any of the others that came with us when we got Rylie and Quinn out,” Cash points out.

“It’s something that we need to ask Pete if it’s possible,” Jensen says, “he’s going to have to come up with backstories and shit for whoever goes in because it’s a high profile event, so there are going to be checks made on them to ensure the security of the event and the high profile guests.”

“That’s true. We’ll wait until he’s ensured that his parents are safe and far away from the event before we ask him whether it’s possible to get a couple of Jynx’s people in as waitstaff for the event,” Rage suggests.

“Yeah, I agree,” Trick replies, “he’s coming up tomorrow with the dress for Ever and the suits for us anyway.”

“To be honest, it would be really good to have some of our people there in staff positions anyway,” Luc says, “rich people always talk around the staff. It’s like they think they’re incapable of listening or repeating what they hear.”

“You’re not wrong,” Rage replies, with a knowing glint in his eye. I always forget that he grew up super rich, he doesn’t behave like it, and I

know for a fact that he would've rather grown up in a loving home, with no money whatsoever rather than with his cunt of a mother.

Fortunately, she's stayed gone and hasn't even attempted to contact him since his father got involved. I know he wishes he had more contact with his dad. They talk over the phone every now and then, but they rarely see each other, and it's honestly due to their crazily busy schedules. Since coming out, Rage's dad's company has exploded in popularity, pretty much the opposite of what his mother always threatened him would happen.

This means that he's continually expanding and traveling, and with our crazy work schedule as well, it's pretty much impossible. It's on my list of things that I need to make sure we do something about when we get some downtime where none of us are seriously injured. As well as seeing Elena and the guys, it feels like it's been far too long, and I'm missing my nieces.

The following day was spent making arrangements. Thankfully, Pete's parents agreed to steer clear without much convincing; I think that their actual words were something along the lines of, 'We know you wouldn't ask us not to attend somewhere unless it was important.' That's why I love them; they're so understanding.

Pete brought over the outfits and had us all try them on to ensure that our measurements hadn't changed since the last time that he dressed us all, and fortunately, they hadn't. My dress is stunning, emerald green, floor length, with tiny bead embellishments, a sweetheart neckline, and a thigh high split. It's beautiful, and the accessories that he's got match perfectly and accentuate the dress rather than take away anything from the look. I'm actually really looking forward to wearing it.

Thanks to the split, it means I have easier access to any weapons. However, we have to keep the weapons to an absolute minimum so as not to arouse suspicion. In Pete's research, he found that they don't actually have to security check the guests for weapons, so we should be okay, but we don't want to risk making anyone look too closely at us.

He also said it should be easy enough to get Rip and Mason in as servers

for the event. He'll do something along the same lines as he did for the janitors at that other job that we did, where he'll send two of the original servers something stating that they needn't come in and then replace their pictures on their IDs for the event and a few other things and then they should be good to go. This means we should hopefully get some more information from people talking around them.

It took most of the day to get everyone's positions mapped out and their duties detailed. Everyone is arriving from different angles and by different means, so all the relevant equipment was handed out to everyone last night.

Jynx and her men are travelling in their car, and the splitting up so Rip and Mason can take their roles as waitstaff. The guys and I are arriving in convoy in some of our nicer cars, and by nicer, I mean, they're fast and stunning. Oh, and stupidly expensive, which means they're a perfect fit for this event.

There's a red-carpet kind of situation for when guests arrive, which honestly makes sense to me because I'm paying thirty thousand a plate, then I damn well want to be treated like a fucking queen. I nearly fucking choked when I realised exactly how much it cost to buy a plate. Jensen assured me that he'd traced the money, and surprisingly enough it was going to the charity that it claimed it was going to.

That made me feel a little bit better, but fucking hell.

Trick and Peter are going to pick Alaric up just outside of the city where the charity event is being held, and then they're going to park up within range of the equipment like my necklace and the earpieces so that we can communicate with everyone. My necklace has had an upgrade thanks to Emmerson and her geniusness, and no, I'm not sure that's an actual word, but it gets my point across. The necklace now detects whether people have the chips in them. I think it has something to do with wavelengths or frequencies; I really didn't understand it when Peter explained, but then again, no one seemed to be able to, so I didn't feel too bad about it.

They also made some tiny bugs that double as trackers that we can put on people of interest, and possibly on Hunt if we manage to get close enough but can't apprehend him for whatever reason.

The other thing that was discussed and sorted out yesterday was that we don't want to risk Hunt escaping, so we've called in Zemi and her guys to set up a perimeter and co-ordinate with Jynx and what's left of her team so that they can work out the places to be. I know that those two are going to hit off, and I bet that Jynx has dropped some hints about Zemi having her own harem

by the end of the night.

I have to admit that it's a big sign of trust on our part that we're trusting Zemi and the guys to work with Jynx because although they've spoken and heard about each other, they're on opposite sides and Jynx is in a reasonably precarious position because of the tight rope line she walks when working with us, it makes the chance of something happening even more dangerous and I wouldn't risk them if I didn't think that they'd be safe with each other.

Of course, Zemi and the guys were told that Jynx and her men have been brought on as consultants and that Mr R has approved them at the same level of clearance that we have. Zemi honestly took it all in her stride and is super excited to meet Jynx. I talk about her a lot, and I've shared the more interesting stories that I can share without putting anyone at risk.

It was decided that we'd try to apprehend Hunt after the charity event or as soon as he leaves, hence the need for us to have so many people around the perimeter none of us are willing to risk any civilians. Pete is also going to be watching surveillance cameras of any that he can hack, so pretty much all of the cameras in the area. He'll have Alaric and Trick helping him, and they'll be able to tell us if there's any suspicious activity anywhere around the event.

Although the guys and I are arriving in convoy, we're actually going to be spending a fair amount of time separate from each other so that we can work the room and hopefully get eyes on Hunt. I will be with two or three of them at a time, that was reiterated to me multiple times much to Jynx's amusement.

I have to admit that it was actually kind of surreal to arrive on a red carpet. I felt like a movie star or something, and at that moment, I decided that I didn't ever want to be famous. It's just not for me. I didn't like all eyes on me and my men. I arrived with Jensen and Atlas and will most likely stay with them for the rest of the evening while the others spread out through the event.

Pete sent the schedule through to me so that I could go over it properly and know what the plan for the evening is. As we do the obligatory mingling when we first arrive, getting asked multiple questions about our business, or at least the guys do, I'm apparently there as eye candy, to be seen and not heard while the men talk, and quite frankly, I'm fine with that it gives me a chance to observe and a chance to keep an eye on the others as they make their way through the crowds of people. Each of them looks perfectly at

home, charming the crowd and talking with what looks like ease with all these billionaire businessmen and women. It's pretty impressive, if I'm honest, and not something that I can do.

After the mingling, we're all asked to take our seats and we listen to some long-winded speeches about something that I'm simply not interested in. I haven't seen Hunt, and although Peter's necklace has picked up several people with questionable backgrounds, none of them have a known direct link to Hunt, so they aren't actually worth doing anything about. By the time we finally make it to the dinner I'm feeling once again disappointed that he doesn't seem to be here and doesn't seem to be turning up either, he's once again a step ahead of us.

The food is absolutely delicious, though, so at least there's that.

There's even more mingling after dinner and while Atlas, Jensen and I are sipping champagne off to the side of the room in an attempt to avoid more boring conversations I spot Luc and Rage making their way toward us with serious faces.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, immediately sensing that there's something wrong.

Luc

I'm kind of in disbelief, and it's because it seemed so unlikely, which is why I haven't said anything until now.

"Well, there's been an interesting development," I say, answering Ever's question as the guys share a curious look.

"What's that?" She asks, concern lacing her tone.

"There are several of my dad's old work associates here," I pause to clarify, "the dodgy ones, and they clearly recognise me."

"That can't be good," Trick mutters in my ear and then orders, "Ever go with Luc and get him to point out the men that used to work with his father? See if you can get the necklace to have a good look at them."

"On it," she replies as she threads her arm through mine, and we leave the guys where they are to move through the crowd.

One by one, I show her the guys, and she manages to get the necklace to

look at them as Pete runs them through his system.

“They definitely recognise you,” she says with a slight momentary frown before she smooths her expression again and smiles serenely. “They’re watching you pretty closely.”

“Yeah, I know,” I mutter, not liking that these men, who I know are dangerous, have their eyes on Ever.

I decide that we’ve got enough of them for Pete to identify and determine any links or threats to us, and gently turn Ever around, my hand on her naked back as I steer her back to the guys. She looks absolutely stunning in this dress, and I know I’m not the only one who’s hoping to take it off her later.

“Okay, the computer is still pulling up the background on them, but I can tell you that none of them have any of Hunt’s bugs in them,” Peter’s voice pulls me out of my thoughts as we finally get to the others.

“We’ll, at least that’s something,” Ace comments and I had briefly forgotten that they were in my ear too.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Luc

“Alright, they’re all associated with Hunt in very small ways, which is why they didn’t flag up on the first viewing of them,” Peter’s voice comes through the earpiece again.

“You do realise that the likelihood of your father not being involved with Hunt when so many of his associates were, is unlikely,” Alaric points out.

“Yeah, I’m aware of that,” I reply, and then as something occurs to me, “you guys dealt with all that. Did you not find a link to Hunt, then?”

“No, we didn’t, but that doesn’t mean there wasn’t one,” Alaric replies.

An idea starts to form in my mind, but before I voice it out loud, I need to know for certain if there is a link between my father and Hunt.

“Luc and Jensen, why don’t you see if you can overhear anything important? Two of the people that you identified have just walked out of the door on the right of the room by the buffet. As far as I’m aware, there’s a smoking area down there somewhere.” Trick suggests.

“You got it, boss,” I reply, liking that Trick is on the same wavelength as I am and has given me the opportunity to find out for sure if my father really was involved with Hunt or just the people he worked with.

“Rip and I will work the room and see if we can find out anything more about it,” Mason adds.

“Good thinking, thank you guys,” Trick replies, and I see them start to weave through the crowd with their trays, the two of them heading toward people that I picked out.

I turn to look at a grinning Jensen, “Are you ready to test those stealth skills that you’ve been working on?”

“Absolutely,” he replies, bouncing on his toes and looking excited.

His excitement is infectious, “Consider this your first lesson.”

“Have fun you two,” Ever smiles, kissing us both on the cheek and whispering quietly, “Stay safe, or I’m going to get stabby,”

“You’ve got it, Angel,” Jensen smiles, his eyes heated.

Jensen and I weave through the crowd, and I can feel eyes on me. It doesn’t really matter if they see me walk through the door; the men that Jensen and I are interested in walked through a while ago, and as far as everyone else is concerned, we’re going for a smoke.

When we walk through the door, we’re greeted by a long hallway and several other people all walking in the same direction. The good news about that is that it means that we’re able to blend in, and we keep our heads down. When we get out to a massive balcony, I scan the area to find somewhere inconspicuous to stand that’s reasonably close to where the two men who used to work for my father are. Fortunately, we aren’t the only ones out here who aren’t smoking, so that doesn’t immediately trigger us as suspicious.

After weaving our way to stand near them, which is thankfully by the balcony’s edge so that Jensen and I can look out over the city below, we sip our drinks as Jensen places himself between the men and me. They’re unlikely to say anything interesting if I’m standing right next to them.

There’s a lot of posturing and trying to one-up each other, which is quite frankly boring as hell before they fall silent momentarily, both smoking their cigars.

“Did you see, Carmichael’s son is here?” One of them asks, keeping his voice low.

Jensen and I share a look as we continue to watch the horizon and sip our drinks.

“Are you surprised that he’s taking after his father?” The other one replies, “I mean, his father was tight with Hunt. I’m actually surprised that Hunt allowed him to be arrested in the first place.”

My eyebrows hit my hairline. My father worked closely with Hunt. So he had his fingers in more pies than we thought he did then. More than even Mr R and the organisation realised. His association with Blake was almost small compared to what his association with Hunt could mean.

“Hunt has obviously got him working the same positions as his dad. It will be interesting to see if he can handle it better,” the other says with a distinct hint of bitterness.

I’ve heard all I need to, and unfortunately, it means that the idea I had earlier is something that I’m going to need to do, as much as I’d rather not. I’ll wait to bring it up until I can talk to everyone together, and just my family to start with. It’s not going to be an easy thing for me to do.

They carry on talking, slowly moving away from the subject of my father, and I nod my head at Jensen. We slowly move away from the men, heading back through the crowd and back inside the lavish building.

As soon as we're alone, Jensen asks, "Are you okay?"

I nod, "Yeah, I think so. I mean, it's definitely not something that I thought that we'd come across tonight."

"I don't think any of us could have predicted that there was a link between your father and Hunt," Jensen replies.

"Let's get back to the others," I say, gently tapping my ear, and understanding fills his eyes.

Our family may have earpieces and be listening in but so are Zemi and her guys, and although I consider them some of my closest friends, I am not comfortable sharing this part of my life with them. Not right now, anyway. Thankfully, Jensen understands this and doesn't ask any questions.

"Can we go yet?" Jensen mutters as we walk down the empty hallway.

There's a heavy sigh from the other end of the earpieces, as Trick replies, "I want to check that Jynx and Zemi haven't found anything around the perimeter, and then you guys may as well come out. The evening is almost over anyway, and I don't think it's likely that Hunt is going to turn up now."

"Trick's right, it's unlikely," Alaric adds through the earpiece and then adds, "We had no idea that your father was working for Hunt. We have a lead that we can follow. It's going to take a while to gain access to him though."

I sigh, "I have an idea about that, but I'll let you guys know when we get home."

"You got it, Luc," Trick says before Alaric can say anything, and I know that it's because Alaric is starting to get frustrated and impatient when it comes to Hunt, especially since Liam is involved and now my father is as well.

"Let us know if the girls find anything. I'm more than ready to get out of here," I say as we pull open the door and make a beeline for Ever and the others, who are all standing together now.

Jynx

“I’m bored,” Zemi mutters from beside me as we watch the street, and I smirk, as she adds, “I was really hoping I could at least shoot something tonight.”

I can’t help the giggle that escapes me, she’s a fucking riot, and I’ve been on the edge of laughter all night. “Me too, if I’m honest. Do you think the guys are having any more luck?”

“I doubt it,” Zemi replies.

Trick left me in complete charge of deciding where to station everyone around the perimeter and who got paired up with whom, which, of course, meant that I split us all up so we could get to know each other better and I paired myself with Zemi. I know that Ever likes her, and I want to get to know her as well. Not only that but I wanted to see if there was a real chance for her and the guys. From what Ever’s described, they’ve taken a lot longer than either of us did to succumb, and I honestly think that they’ve almost taken too long now, and they’ve made it even harder for themselves to admit because they all have a serious foundation of friendship, I mean they all live together. Initially, it was to make last-minute jobs more straightforward to be ready for because they’re all in the same place, but now it’s apparent that it’s more than that for them.

“You could turn on your earpiece and ask?” I suggest, “My men have already messaged asking why we turned them off, although I do keep turning it back on to check in.”

Zemi sighs as her feet stop swinging on the roof top edge for the first time since we sat down. I would’ve thought it was nerves, but it’s not; she’s just incapable of staying still. She sighs again and tells me, “Honestly, I just need a break, Raiden got better after Ever’s guys spoke to him but he’s still acting like an ass at times, and I’m going to smack him in a minute.”

I pause and tilt my head, “You’ve explained quite a lot of the situation to me since we’ve been up here.”

She winces and interrupts, “Sorry about that, I kind of felt like I already knew you since Ever always talk about you.”

I smile, “Me too, and it’s okay, honestly. What I was going to ask is, would you like my opinion from an outsider's point of view?”

She glances at me, “Yes, please? At this point, I’ll take any input from anyone who’s willing to give it to me. I’m at my wit's end.”

“I think he’s scared, not because of how badly he got hurt but because of

how badly his team members, his family got hurt, and his friends, Jensen almost died, hell he did fucking die, and Raiden witnessed that. Not only that but he had no idea if you were okay, and I can guarantee that scared him the most. It's obvious how much he cares about you. I think you should talk to him and refuse to let him tell you that he's okay, and then if he needs to get him to talk to Mr R's therapists, he has good ones, and they will help."

Zemi stares at me in silence as she processes what I've said and then it's like she suddenly sees all of his behavior in a different light and realisation dawns on her.

"Fucking hell, how the fuck did I miss that? It's so damn obvious," she mutters.

"You've had the others to focus on too, and for the record, I think the other two are handling it fine, but Raiden is the leader, and they always tend to take things like this harder. Encourage him to speak honestly to Trick as well; he'll understand better than most." I add.

"Thank you," Zemi says sincerely, looking more at ease and less tense than she has done this whole time. "I'll talk to him properly and try not to smack him in the process."

I chuckle, "If he's anything like a couple of my men, then he might need it. I mean, there's a chance that he doesn't realise what's really wrong."

"Yeah, that would make more sense when it comes to Raiden. He's not great at letting himself feel his feels."

"Yeah, that sounds familiar," I reply and then nudge her shoulder, "we really should turn these back on before we get in trouble."

She grins, "Yeah, you're right. Hey, we might hear something juicy since they think we aren't listening."

"Or disturbing, they're boys. You never really know what's going to come out of their mouths next. But it could be amusing either way, so stay quiet, and let's see what we can hear."

She nods, her feet swinging again with her excitement as we press the button at the same time.

"What do you think they're doing?" I hear who I think is Saint, but I don't know them well enough to be able to say for certain that it is him.

"Talking probably," Raiden's voice replies, and that one I do recognise, although he sounds decidedly less surly right now, and I'd be willing to bet one of my guys had a word with him or told him to quit it.

"Yeah, but about what?" Wilder asks, sounding curious.

“Sex,” I hear Ace chime in purely because he’s a wind-up and trying to get a rise out of Zemi’s guys.

“What?” Zep snaps, his tone sharp before he reels it in a bit and adds, “Sex with who?”

His attempt at sounding nonchalant is pathetic, and I know for a fact that everyone knows it. My men don’t pull him up on it though, but I do hear the amusement they are trying to hide in their voices.

Malachi is the first to reply, “Well, Jynx will be talking about sex with us. She likes to share; we’ve gotten used to it now.”

Rome chuckles, “Not that we had much choice.”

“Thankfully, it’s only really with Ever, Lyric, and Pete that she shares things about our sex life,” Ace adds, sounding amused as always, “and now apparently Zemi too.”

“As for who Zemi’s talking about, I have no idea,” Rome replies.

I decide that it is probably a good idea to interrupt their conversation now, just in case someone says something that shouldn’t be heard.

“Having an interesting conversation there, boys,” I say, unable to keep the amusement from my tone.

“Jynx,” Rome replies in a slight chastising note to his tone, “how long have you two been listening.”

“Long enough,” I practically sing back to him while Zemi snickers next to me.

Thankfully, before anyone can question us further, Trick’s voice comes through the earpieces and asks whether we’ve found anything while we’ve been watching the perimeter. When we confirm that we haven’t, he tells us to start bringing it in and getting ready to head home since there’s not much point in hanging around now. The event is nearly over, and Hunt hasn’t made an appearance. We were all contacted by Ever and the others earlier, so we know that Luc’s dad apparently has a link with Hunt. The comms went silent after that though, so I’m assuming that we’ll get the update on that later.

Ever

Trick has finally given us the go-ahead to leave, and not a moment too

soon. I am so done with this place and these people. I am also very aware that Luc is still being watched closely, and he's not happy about it.

As soon as we all get outside of the venue, the cold night air wrapping around us and the feel of eyes still following us, we're approached by a big motherfucker, dressed in a suit with a stoic expression, of course. We all immediately tense, getting ready to fight.

"He's one of Hunt's inner circle," Pete says through the earpieces.

We don't reply, our entire focus is on the man who has his hands on show and is deliberately making slow and steady movements so that we don't shoot him.

"From Hunt," he says as Atlas steps forward and takes the envelope off him.

Atlas grasps the man's arm, ready to take him in, when a voice from behind us calls us, "Is everything okay out here Luka?"

The man who gave us the envelope, Luka, smirks as he shakes off Atlas's hand, straightens his suit jacket, and replies, "Everything is fine, I was just catching up with some old friends."

We watch him cautiously as he moves past us and heads into the building, being warmly greeted by everyone. As much as it would've been beneficial for us to arrest him now, it would create a scene right outside of the charity dinner and I can guarantee that Hunt will have a plan in place if we were to try, one that would put innocent, or I should say mostly innocent lives at risk. We aren't willing to risk that, so we have to let him go.

The smug bastard takes the time to wink at us from inside, and I have to seriously control myself to stop from giving him the finger or just snarling. I do make a silent vow to myself that I will punch him in the face at some point in his life because I feel like he's the type of person who deserves it.

"What does it say?" Cash asks curiously.

"We need to get you guys out of sight," Trick interrupts before Atlas can answer. "I'll thank Zemi and the guys and send them home. We can catch them up tomorrow if we need to and get Jynx and the others to meet us up at the house. it's late but we need to know what that says."

"I also have something that I want to run by you all that is probably best done sooner rather than later before I think better of it," Luc adds.

We all look at him concerned, but really, there's no time to question him now as we hurry to the cars, and I quickly get in the car with Atlas and Jensen, the same car that I arrived in.

I can't feel my toes, only because they've been squished into high heels and I've been on my feet for so long, but because it really was damn cold out there, and I'm now dreaming of fluffy socks.

"Do you think Luc is going to be okay?" I ask the silent car after we've all taken out and turned off our earpieces.

"Yes, I think he will be, but whether he is before then is another question," Jensen replies, somewhat cryptically.

"I don't think he ever planned on having to deal with anything to do with his father again, and thanks to Hunt, he's now being forced to," Atlas replies.

"You're both right, the best thing we can do is be there for him and make sure that he is handling it and not burying it," I add, gnawing on my lip nervously.

"I am curious about what his idea is," Jensen adds. "And why Alaric and the organisation didn't know about the link between his father and Hunt."

"I didn't think that he was that clever to keep something that big hidden," Atlas adds.

"But maybe that's what makes him so clever. He gave away the lesser criminal and made himself out to be useless at keeping secrets so that anything to do with Hunt wouldn't get found or even hinted at," I suggest.

"It's far more clever than I thought that he was capable of, to be honest." Jensen replies.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Right, everyone go and get changed, and then we’ll meet at the dining room table so that we can talk over the evening and whatever Luc would like to talk to us about,” Trick orders as soon as we walk through the front door. He knows us all well enough to know that we’re all going to want to get out of our formal clothes as quickly as possible.

“Are Jynx and the others meeting us up here?” Rafe asks curiously as we head toward the stairs.

Well, they do. I’m still standing by the front door trying to fight with my damn shoes in order to get the fuckers off because, at this point, I am mildly panicking that my toes might stay in my shoe when I take them off, I’m being dramatic, but the longer that it takes me to remove the shoe and undo the stupid fucking straps around my ankles the more confident I am that my toes have fallen off, it doesn’t help that I can’t feel them. Peter’s hands bat mine away gently as he swiftly and, with seemingly little effort, undoes my shoes and then gives me a curious yet amused look as I immediately kick them off and stare down at my toes, wriggling them in relief.

He chuckles as realisation dawns on him, “Did your toes go numb?”

I nod, “Thought I was going to be toeless.”

It’s at that point that I realise the room is silent, and all of the guys are looking at me, completely baffled and highly amused.

“Anyway,” Trick says into the silence and turns back to Rafe, “yeah, Jynx and the guys are just getting changed, and then they’re going to meet us up here for the debrief. I also told Zemi and the others that we’d fill them in when we can, and if we need them again, we’d let them know.” He then looks at me, “and she mentioned something about going to their place next weekend?”

“Oh shit, did I not mention that?” I ask, looking around at them all.

“No, you didn’t,” Atlas smirks.

I smile innocently, “Hey guys, Zemi and the others have invited us up next weekend. I told them as long as we can get the time off with the Hunt case,

we'd be there."

My statement is met by several rolled eyes and smiles before Trick sighs and says, "We should be able to make that work. It would be nice to hang out with them properly, somewhere not at work."

"Awesome," I reply as I go back to frowning at my toes and wriggling them.

I look up just in time to see Rafe stop in front of me. He's clearly decided that I'm too much of a hazard in my current state as he lifts me up and puts me over his shoulder, carrying me upstairs, and making everyone else chuckle.

"I'm not crazy," I mutter as I watch his ass as he carries me up the stairs. You know, there are much worse views that I could be looking at than the very perky ass of Rafe.

"No, you aren't; however, I think we can all agree that it's probably best to get you out of those uncomfortable shoes and into some fluffy socks before you actually do go crazy and the rest of us are left trying to keep up," Rafe replies very matter of fact like it's a foregone conclusion.

The thing is, I can't really argue with him because that's exactly what I want to do, and he's not wrong. Although I do think that he's being a little bit dramatic in saying that I'd go crazy, I don't think that it would be quite that bad.

He puts me down gently in front of my door and then lifts one of his big hands to cup my face as the others all disappear to change out of their suits.

"Are you okay?" he asks me softly.

"I'm fine. I'm more worried about Luc than I am about anyone else right now," I tell him honestly.

"Good," he replies, "I just wanted to check and make sure. Go and get some fluffy socks on, and let's find out what Hunt's written in this letter."

I nod and turn on my heel, rushing into my bedroom so I can do as he suggested. Now that he's reminded me, my toes really are still cold, and I want to know what's going on with the letter and with Luc and his idea, too.

By the time that I'm dressed in comfy clothes and my feet are all toastie, everyone is already downstairs waiting. I take my seat next to Jynx and take my drink in my hand as the table quiets down. I look around at everyone to make sure that we're all here, and I'm unsurprised to see Alaric sitting amongst the others and sipping a coffee. He must have driven here after picking up his car from wherever he left it in the city when he joined Trick

and Pete in the van.

“Shall we get started now that everyone is here?” he asks, looking around at all of us.

“I think the first thing that should be noted is that Liam gave us a reasonably good tip, even if Hunt wasn’t there,” Jensen replies.

“Agreed, he didn’t lead us on a wild goose chase and have us barking up the wrong tree. He didn’t even plan an ambush or anything like that,” Riot replies.

“It does make me wonder though,” Rip starts, and we all look at him curiously. “Well, he knows that Luc’s father was working with Blake, right? I mean, presumably, he was working with him as well. So, maybe Liam knows that he was working with Hunt as well, and that’s another reason why he suggested that you guys go?”

We all pause for a second as we think it over. I, for one, haven’t considered that, but it is the way that Liam works, and really, would we have believed him if he had said that Luc’s father worked with Hunt? I honestly don’t think so.

“It’s entirely possible and something we can ask him unless he decides to go AWOL again.” Trick replies.

“It really irritates me that we missed it,” Alaric adds, his arms folded over his chest, “we combed through all of the information at the house, at the lake house, his offices everywhere, and we not once found any information that would even suggest that there was a link to Hunt. More than that, but he was offered in questioning a lighter sentence if he gave up names of significance, and he never even hinted that he knew of anyone worth really knowing, apart from Blake.”

“It would seem that he played the game incredibly well,” Rafe says.

“My father always was good at chess,” Luc sneers, his eyes dark as he contemplates something, and I’d be willing to bet that he was thinking about what he mentioned he wanted to talk to us about earlier.

Trick seems to sense that Luc isn’t quite ready to discuss it yet though, so he says, “Alright, why don’t we start with the letter and see if Hunt has anything interesting or helpful to say.”

“Like that, he’s realised he can never win against us, and he’s going to turn himself in?” Jensen asks with a tick of his lips, and the rest of us smile.

“I think that may be wishful thinking there, dude,” Mason points out.

Jensen shrugs with a smile, and we all look at Atlas since he’s the one who

has the letter that the smug bastard gave to him.

“I guess I’m reading the letter then,” he smirks as he opens it and takes out the single piece of paper. “Isn’t it interesting that she was your mother? I’m ashamed to say that I actually wasn’t aware of that. I simply chose her because she’s particularly good at acting pathetic, and I was starting to find her company tedious. Never fear my fellow adversaries; I won’t make the same mistake again. Oh, and give me my favourite tech designer back before I’m forced to do something that we’d all regret.”

No one says anything as we all just sit in silence and absorb the absolutely crazy shit that Atlas just read.

“Well, he’s certainly unhinged,” Rip points out.

“Half of that didn’t make much sense, and he’s talking about Emmerson like she’s a belonging and not a person,” Jensen adds.

“We knew that he didn’t view people as people though,” Riot points out.

“Are you okay?” Jynx asks me, and everyone else looks at me to make sure that I am.

“Yeah, I am. I mean, his behavior appalls me, but if anything it just makes me want to catch him more, and I didn’t know Amelia, not in any sense of the word, apart from maybe vague memories from when I was a kid. Which I’m not even sure are real. There’s a possibility that I made them up in order to make myself feel better. She’s a victim, and I feel about it like I would any victim.” I reply honestly.

I know my reaction isn’t quite what other people would feel and how they would react, but it’s how I feel. One day, I will forgive her for leaving me with my father and only saving herself, but I’m not there yet, and my words are true. I feel about her how I would feel about any victim.

“Okay, good.” Jynx replies, “I just wanted to make sure.”

“Are we really going to believe him when he says that he didn’t know that Amelia was Ever’s mom?” Ace asks, sounding like he doesn’t believe it at all.

“I’m not sure,” Cash replies with a frown as he thinks it over.

“The thing that makes me think he’s telling the truth is that he could’ve easily lied, and we would’ve believed him. We already thought that he knew, and that was why she was there in the first place,” Rome points out.

“Yeah, that’s a good point, actually,” Trick muses.

“I think we could probably spend all evening trying to work out Hunt’s thought process without actually getting anywhere. There’s no understanding

crazy,” Mal says.

“He’s right,” Atlas agrees and then adds, “and it doesn’t give us any more leads, so we’re still where we were before we attended the charity event.”

“I guess that’s my cue to start talking,” Luc interrupts, having been mostly quiet up until now.

It’s obvious, to me at least, that it’s been playing on his mind, and whatever he’s about to suggest is not something that he’s suggesting lightly.

“Only if you’re sure, dude,” Rage replies, frowning heavily.

Luc nods and takes a breath before he says, “I think I should go back to the mausoleum,” he looks at Alaric, “I know that you guys said that you went over the place with a fine tooth comb, but there may be a couple of places that you missed and information about Hunt could be kept there. They’re difficult to find if you don’t know where they are and difficult to describe the location of to someone else too.”

Alaric tilts his head in consideration, “Are you sure you want to go back there? Even I know what kind of place that was for you.”

Luc nods, “Yeah, it’s time, and this is important anyway. There could be a clue at my father’s house that could give us all the information that we need in order to find Hunt. Is it still being watched, or has it just been left?”

“We don’t have agents watching it anymore, but we do have remote surveillance on it just in case your mother decides to make a reappearance back at the house.” Alaric replies.

Luc nods, “Okay, well, if everyone agrees, I think that we should go and check it out. At worst, your men have already found the information, or they haven’t, but you have more information to work with.”

“Or, at best, we get a link to Hunt and information on him that we don’t have yet and wouldn’t have if we hadn’t gone to the charity meal like Liam suggested,” Peter says.

“We need to be incredibly careful where Liam is concerned,” Alaric warns us, his eyes flashing with slight confusion. Like the rest of us, he’s not sure how to deal with Liam’s behavior at the moment either.

“We know, don’t worry,” Atlas replies. “If he’s going to carry on being useful when it comes to Hunt though, we can’t really afford to turn that help down at the moment.”

“No, you’re right,” Alaric replies, not sounding too happy about it at all.

“I know it would be long-winded and tedious, but would it be worth trying to get in to talk to Luc’s dad? He might be willing to talk to us now that we

know in the first place, if that makes sense?” Pete asks, looking at Alaric.

Alaric considers it for a second, “It couldn’t hurt to get the process started, but it is going to take a while, and I’d hope that we’ve put the Hunt situation to bed by the time that we get into see him.”

“Okay, well, get the process started anyway. As you said, it couldn’t hurt, and it would be better to have easy access to him because we’ve already requested it rather than having to start the process from scratch and needing to get to him quickly but not being able to.” Trick orders.

“So, we’re going back to Serendipity, to Luc’s place then?” Rage asks.

Everyone looks at Luc to make sure that he really wants to go back there, and he nods, “Yeah, it looks like it.”

Trick nods, “We’ll head out tomorrow afternoon. We’ll have to see the parents at some point too, because they’ll know if we’re in town and don’t see them, and then we’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Yeah, I’m good with that. The sooner we can get it over with, the better.” Luc replies. He seems reasonably relaxed, but there’s a tension around his eyes that I don’t like.

Trick turns to look at Jynx and the guys, “If it’s okay with you guys, I’m going to ask that you stay here. It’s risky enough for us to go back to town, which is why we try not to do it too often. If we all turn up, word could spread to the wrong people, and our parents could be at risk.”

Rome is nodding before Trick has even finished his sentence and replies before anyone else can, “Of course. We don’t want to put any of your parents at risk.”

“Not just that, but even though this is for a case, it’s taken a personal turn that we all know may become difficult. It’s probably best that you guys handle this as a family anyway,” Jynx adds insightfully, and Luc gives her an appreciative smile.

“Thanks, guys,” Luc says.

“No problem. Keep us in the loop though, and if anything comes up while you’re there and you need us, just let us know.” Rome offers.

“Is there anything you need us to do while you’re out of town?” Rip asks.

Trick thinks for a moment and then shakes his head, “Not really. You could follow up with any feelers that you’ve got out on your side of things and see if anyone has any idea of where Hunt is laying low. We need to come at this from as many angles as we possibly can so that we have a better chance of finally catching Hunt and starting to fix the giant mess that he’s

made.”

“Agreed,” Atty says while the rest of us nod. He looks at his uncle as he adds, “Which is why we need to use all the resources available to us, which includes Liam.”

Alaric sighs, and rubs his hand through his hair, “I know you’re right; I just don’t like it. We’ve completely switched gears. For years we were trying to catch the fucker, and now we’re effectively working with him.”

“I know,” Atlas replies, “believe me, I know how weird it is. But Hunt is a bigger threat than we have gone up against before; even Blake was small compared to the reach and influence that Hunt has.”

Alaric nods, “I hear you.”

“Good,” Atlas replies.

Rome clears his throat as he interrupts and gets us back on track, “We can definitely follow up with some of our contacts and see if anyone knows anything.”

“Great, thanks, guys.” Trick replies. “Pete, are you coming with us tomorrow?”

Peter nods, with a smile, “Absolutely. Not only will I not miss out on seeing the parents, but I’m not ashamed to admit I’m nosey and incredibly curious about this information that Luc’s dad may have.”

“Alright. We’ll head back tomorrow afternoon, and I’ll let Mr R know what’s going on,” Trick replies.

“Can I come with you?” Alaric asks.

“Of course,” Trick replies.

“Do you want to stay here tonight?” I ask him and then add, “It’s already late, and there’s no point in you trying to find somewhere else, especially if you’re coming with us tomorrow anyway.”

Alaric smiles, the tension easing slightly, “Yeah, that would be great, actually.”

“Great,” Trick smiles. “Let’s get some sleep then; we’ve got some traveling to do tomorrow.”

“I’ll message Jenny and Kat and let them know we’re coming into town but aren’t staying long, so it will be a flying visit,” I say as I pull out my phone. I know it’s late, but if they’re asleep, then they’ll get it in the morning.

“Good idea,” Cash grimaces.

“It’s not going to be that easy to get them to let us do a flying visit. We’ll

have to tell them we're in town for business." Rafe suggests.

"Well, why don't we visit first and then head out to Luc's parents' place? At least that way, we can tell them that we have an appointment and we really need to get going," Rage suggests.

"That might be a better idea anyway, actually," Luc replies, "In all honesty, I have no idea how being in that house is going to affect me."

"Okay, man, we'll do that then." Trick says, with understanding in his tone.

"If it gets too much while we're there, man, just say the word, and we'll get you out," Atlas says.

Luc nods, "Don't worry. I have no intention of staying there longer than I have to, especially if something triggers me."

Chapter Twenty-Six

“I want you to be completely prepared for it because the better you’re prepared, the less likely you are to be triggered,” Alaric starts, gaining all of our attention, “Other than your father's office and your mother's. The house has pretty much been left exactly as it was when you were most likely last there. So, all the furniture and everything is exactly as it was the last time that you saw it. I’m telling you this because some people struggle to see a place as it always was, more than if it had been completely gutted and everything removed.”

Luc nods, “Thanks, man. That actually makes a lot of sense. If the place is all as it was whenever the traumatic event happened, then it could transport a person straight back there, or they’ll be constantly waiting for whoever else may have been in the house at the time to appear. Whether that’s a now lost one or someone who gave them the trauma in the first place.”

“Exactly,” Alaric replies, watching Luc closely.

“It helps to be aware, and I promise I will tell someone and leave if it gets too difficult,” Luc promises again, most likely because we’re all looking at him with varying levels of concern.

“Good, hopefully, it won’t take too long,” Trick replies and then looks around at us all, “I think that’s enough for tonight. We need to get some rest before we travel back to Serendipity tomorrow.”

We all disperse after that, saying goodbye to Rylie and the guys, while Alaric says goodnight and heads down the hidden hallway to the guest room that we have down there.

“I’m going to head home. Elijah is leaving soon, and I want to spend as much time as I can with him. Give me a message when you leave here tomorrow, and I’ll make sure that I’m ready to be picked up.” Peter says as we walk to the door.

“Yeah, of course,” I reply.

All of my men have either gone up to bed already or are grabbing snacks and last-minute drinks before they head up. I yell goodnight and get several

calls of I love you back before I head upstairs myself. When I reach the top landing, I run into Luc, and I grab his hand, pulling him into my room with me.

“Stay with me tonight?” I ask him with a smile.

“I was actually coming to find you, to see if you’d mind if I stayed in your room tonight,” he smirks.

“Great minds think alike,” I reply, “put whatever you want on the TV. I’m just going to the bathroom, and then I’ll be back for cuddles,” I then add with a waggle of my eyebrows, “or some naked time.”

He chuckles, “Definitely naked time, hurry up.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” I admit, and blow him a kiss as I make my way to the bathroom.

While I’m in there, I decide to have a quick shower since my hair really does need a wash after tonight and being styled, so I quickly do that and then don’t bother getting dressed again since I fully intend to have Luc beneath me in a couple of moments. He clearly has the same idea because he’s lying on top of the covers, gloriously naked, his eyes heated and leaving a path of searing heat as they travel over me.

My eyes greedily take him in as I slowly walk over to him. When I get to the edge of the bed, I swing my leg over his waist and settle myself on top. My nails dig into his chest as his hard-as-steel dick rubs against my clit in the most tantalizing way. My pussy clenches as he props himself up, his mouth taking my nipple as his tongue swirls around the peak and makes me moan in pleasure, as I grind down on him.

I reach my hand down between us both, lifting my hips slightly so that I can wrap my hand around his dick, he shudders as I begin to move my hand, changing my grip every now and then. One of his hands runs up my back as he releases my nipple with a pop, and then, gripping my hair in his hand, he pulls my face down to meet his, his lips colliding with mine in a passionate kiss.

Using his strength, he flips us so that he’s on top, not breaking the kiss as his large palm travels down my body, stopping to tweak my nipples making my back arch before he continues down. My hand finds his dick again as I start pumping, and his fingers expertly circle my clit, with just the right amount of pressure to have my orgasm slowly and deliciously begin to build.

When it gets to the point where all I can think about is having him inside me I line him up with my pussy and he moves his hand, he slowly moves

inside me. Making my pussy clench and shudder in anticipation. He's going too slowly. I don't want that right now, and I lift my hips, surprising him and making him groan as he buries his head in my neck and bites down; my nails dig into his back in retaliation as all of my nerve endings start to fire.

He doesn't carry on his slow torture, quite the opposite; he sets an unrelenting pace, and I meet him thrust for thrust, desperately trying to stay somewhat quiet, although it's not working, and I quickly give up. His fingers strum my nipples as my hands clench his ass, and he changes his angle slightly and not only does it hit completely different, but the change means that my clit is grinding against his pubic bone, and my orgasm crashes over me, wave after wave of pleasure washing over me, and I hear Luc follow quickly behind me before we collapse in a sweaty heap and catch our breath.

After cleaning up, we both snuggle under the covers, and he kisses me slowly, "I love you, Firecracker."

"I love you, too," I reply sleepily, making him smile as we fall asleep to whatever Luc put on the TV before we got thoroughly distracted.

I figure that the first half of the day is going to be pretty relaxing. We're not going on a job, so there's not too much planning or intense talks to do, and we're actually planning on coming back the same day, so there's nothing to pack, which always stresses me out. At breakfast, it was decided that we should leave just before lunch instead of after lunch. The difficulty came when planning with Kat and Jenny, and I kept having to remind them that we could stop in for a coffee, but since we're actually in town for work, we can't stay any longer than that.

Walking into the kitchen after I've got dressed, I realise that Rafe is making up some subs for the road, and I should've known that he wasn't going to let us stop for fast food if he could help it.

"I'm just going to call Rylie and check-in. I haven't heard from her for a couple of days, and I want to make sure she's okay, especially since she's going after Hunt's more dangerous people," I announce to the room as a whole.

Alaric smiles, “She’s an amazing agent. I know that Mr R has been trying to get her to join a team for a while, but she really does work better alone.”

“Yeah, some people just do.” I reply, “Rylie’s been burned a lot by other people, and it understandably makes her nervous and less trusting of other people.”

Alaric nods, “I can’t say I blame her. It’s not easy growing up in the criminal world, not really feeling like you fit in it.”

It occurs to me then, that Alaric and Rylie had similar upbringings; they were both raised in the criminal world by criminal parents, and they’ve both split off from that. The only significant difference would be that Rylie loves her parents and still gets on with them. They were supportive of her and never pushed her to do something that she didn’t want to do, and from what I’ve gathered from Alaric about his upbringing, it was the complete opposite and is the reason why Liam turned out how he did.

“You two have a lot in common in that respect,” I point out.

“Yeah, I guess we do,” Alaric replies, and then clears his expression, pushing the memories of the past away, “that reminds me, I need to check in with Ryan.”

“Is he okay?” I ask. After having him up with D at Christmas, we’ve all become quite fond of him, and I wouldn’t say I like the situation that he’s been forced into.

Alaric’s face becomes stern, “D and I are working on it.”

He gets up and leaves the room in order to make the call, and it doesn’t escape me that he didn’t answer the question. We offered to help Ryan when he was here at Christmas, and he really seemed to consider it. I just hope that he doesn’t leave it too late for us to help him. I don’t even know the entire situation, just a vague notion and his body language when it was brought up, and the reaction of D and Alaric who don’t really take anything too seriously. It’s one of those things that niggles at me constantly. I can’t do anything about it until we’re asked to though so it’s just one of those things that has to be put on the back burner.

I walk to the end of the extension, plopping my ass down on the squishy and comfortable couch and press the dial button.

“Hey girl,” Rylie greets me happily as she picks up on the second ring.

I smile, “Hey, I was just checking in making sure you’re doing okay.”

“Yeah, I’m good; this is actually really fun, some of these people are not who you’d expect them to be. He’s got people fucking everywhere, and I

mean everywhere,” Rylie replies.

“You know, that doesn’t surprise me in the slightest, but it does worry me,” I reply with a frown, that I know that she can’t see.

“Oh, it’s extremely concerning, but hopefully with all the names that we’ve gotten from Emmerson and from Quinn, which was almost as extensive since he was gathering as much information as he could while he tried to formulate a plan to escape, anyway since we have all of that information we should be able to get the majority of them out of the way.”

“Thank fuck for that. Can I ask you a question? It’s been bugging me,” I say, as I remember what I’ve been meaning to ask her but always seem to forget.

“Sure,” Rylie replies.

“How did you get the message to me and the coordinates?”

“Oh, well I’m an exceptional pickpocket, and one of the guards who was watching me was an exceptional idiot, so that’s how I got the phone. The coordinates were a little bit more tricky. I overheard Hunt mention them, he liked to do everything in coordinates for some stupid reason, but I had no idea if they were going to be for our next location or for somewhere else. I figured either way, you’d get some more information and potentially be able to save Quinn and me. I did try to hold on to the phone for as long as possible in the hopes that you’d be able to trace it. It was all just luck, really,” Rylie replies casually.

“Yeah, a whole lot of luck,” I agree.

“If you’re up to it, you should come on one of these jobs with me to find Hunt’s people, honestly it’s fun, and you’d be so surprised about who some of them are, I’ll get us a good one to go after.”

Her offer surprises me, and I ask with a hint of amusement, “I thought you liked working alone?”

She chuckles, “I do most of the time but I wouldn’t mind some company and it would be cool to work a job with you.”

It doesn’t take me very long at all to realise that I’m interested in going, and I reply, “Yeah, sounds like fun to me. Run it by Mr R and then let me know when we’re heading out.”

Excitement fills Rylie’s tone as she replies, “Awesome, I’ll see what he says. Keep me in the loop with Hunt.”

“Will do,” I reply, and then we promptly hang up.

“Guys,” Luc says as he walks into the kitchen, and I turn around on the

couch to see that everyone is gathered either in the kitchen or at the table.

“Everything okay, dude?” Jensen asks him.

“Yeah, I was just thinking though, it might be a good idea to stop off at headquarters since it’s not too big of a detour on the way and look through the report from when they raided my father’s place—that way, I can check to see if they found all of his hiding places. There’s no point going if they did,” Luc suggests, rubbing his hand across the back of his neck.

Trick shrugs, “Yeah, it can’t hurt. Although, Mom and Kat know we’re coming so either way, we have to go and see them today.”

“Can’t we just get Mr R to send the information through?” Rage asks.

Rafe chimes in, “He’s so busy with the Hunt case and making sure that all of the people that they’re rounding up are getting the help that they need that it most likely will take him a while to get back to us, and we want to get this done today.”

“Yeah, that’s a good point.” Riot replies.

“He most likely won’t be checking his emails regularly either,” Alaric adds. “It’s a good idea.”

“Alright, that settles it then. Let’s get going then, or we aren’t going to have enough time to get to Serendipity, see Mom and Kat, and check out Luc’s place,” Trick says as he gets up, prompting us to do the same.

Standing up, I make my way through the house toward the front door with the others. Since we’ve got Pete and Alaric with us today, we’re going to go in separate cars, and all just meet at headquarters.

Although headquarters is kind of on the way to Serendipity, it is a twenty-minute slight detour. It means we’re going to be getting back home pretty late tonight. I get why he wants to check out the files though, if he finds that they’ve checked the places that he’s thinking of then that means that he doesn’t have to go back to that house. If I were in the same situation then I’d want to do the same and make sure that I really had to go back there.

“Are we heading straight to Mr R’s office?” Pete asks.

“Yeah, he’ll have to sign off to give us access to any files that we want anyway, so we may as well,” Alaric replies.

Once we get to the office, Jensen manages to knock before I just walk in, and I chuckle when Mr R actually looks surprised to see us since we usually just barge in without knocking, or at least I do.

“I didn’t expect to see you guys today. Is everything okay?” he asks, seeming a bit preoccupied himself.

“Yeah, we were wondering if we could have the access code to the files about Luc’s father?” Trick asks.

“Yeah, of course. Why?” Mr R replies as he starts to tap away on his laptop.

“We’re heading out there today. After it became apparent that my father worked for Hunt, I want to check a few places that could have been missed. But due to the circumstances surrounding going back there, I’d rather make certain that they weren’t already checked.” Luc explains.

Mr R nods thoughtfully, “Yeah, I think that’s a really good idea. I’d rather not have you exposed to something that could trigger you if there’s a chance that you don’t need to be.”

“Thank you,” Luc replies.

Mr R smiles and writes something down on a notepad before handing it to Peter, “Here you go. You are welcome to use my office while you go through them, but I need to go and see Emmerson. Rylie is waiting.”

I frown at his tone, “Is everything okay?”

Mr R sighs heavily and pinches the bridge of his nose, “Not really. We’ve had an update on Emmerson’s mother. She’s been in and out of the theatre for the past few days. They’ve done everything that they can to save her, but there’s just too much damage. They’d fix one problem and then find another. It turns out that she has some sort of poison running through her and we have no idea what it is or if it’s somehow transferrable. She couldn’t survive it and I’ve just got the call that she’s passed.”

“Oh poor Emmerson,” I mutter, “her poor mother, she had to have gone through hell.”

“There’s absolutely no doubt about that,” Mr R replies.

“Let me know if Emmerson needs anything,” I tell him.

“I will, but fortunately, she’s grown quite close to Rylie since they’ve been staying in such close proximity. I’m hoping that will be enough to help her through this,” Mr R replies thoughtfully as he starts to stand up.

“Please let her know that I’m here for her as well if she needs to talk or wants to build something or anything like that,” Pete adds.

They’ve gotten quite close since they’ve been working together and the worry for her is evident in his tone and his expression.

“I will, Pete,” Mr R says and then adds, “Let me know if you’re still going to the house so that I can make sure that the right people go and they don’t send out a team if they see you on the security footage.”

“Will do,” Trick replies.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

As soon as Mr R has left the room, Pete pulls out his laptop and takes a seat at the giant conference table that Mr R has in here, and the rest of us all take seats as well as we wait for Pete to pull up the file.

“I hope that Emmerson is okay and that she uses this to further her drive to put Hunt away and doesn’t allow it to warp her,” Rage says into the silence.

“I don’t think it will. After all, she’s survived this long and still wants to do the right thing. We might have just to make sure that we get to Hunt before she has the chance to, because she strikes me as the kind of person who wouldn’t mind taking him out in retribution for her mother.” I say thoughtfully.

“You really think she would?” Atlas asks me.

“Oh, definitely,” I reply firmly. I don’t have any doubt that she would. She may love all things tech and designing, but that doesn’t mean that she’s not completely capable of taking someone out if she has to. I think there’s a lot more to her than she’s letting on, and if I were her, I’d be keeping my cards close to my chest while I’m in an unfamiliar environment, too.

“Well, she’s in the right place at least, and she’s still being closely watched thanks to the circumstances that she was brought in by, so she won’t have the chance to go after Hunt before we get to him,” Riot points out.

“That’s true. Mr R will be aware that could be an issue too, so he’ll most likely have some other projects for her to work on and to try and keep her busy,” Peter points out, having passed the laptop to Luc so that he can go through it to see if they checked where he was thinking.

“Yeah, that’s a good point. I’m still worried about her,” I say, and the guys all nod in agreement.

Emmerson clearly cared a lot about her mother and actually had a good relationship with her, and although she said that she hopes her mother found peace if she’s no longer alive, there would’ve still been hope that she was alive and that Emmerson didn’t have to go through the rest of her life without her mother. This news is going to hit her hard.

While we've been talking, Luc's been going through the reports that Mr R gave him access to, and he interrupts with a frown, "They haven't checked everywhere that I know he had stuff stored. There are two places where they didn't check. So I guess we have to go back like planned."

"Sorry man, I know you were kind of hoping that you didn't have to go back," Jensen says, clapping him on the shoulder.

"You know we don't have to," Trick says, "you could just tell us, and we'll go check it out."

"He's right," Alaric adds, "there's no need for you actually to be there."

Luc shakes his head as he leans back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest, "I know, but I think I need to. I think it may help with closure. I've built it up so much in my head that I almost need to go to prove that I can because otherwise, it's just going to become an even bigger thing than I've already made it."

"You know, that actually makes sense," Rage replies.

"I can make sense sometimes," Luc teases and then closes down the laptop and hands it back to Pete. "Let's get going. We told Kat and Jenny we'd be there fairly soon, and I don't want to take longer than we really have to, despite what I said a second ago."

"Fair enough, man," Trick says.

We make sure that we leave the office exactly as we found it and also make sure to lock it up properly just in case anyone gets nosey and decides to enter while Mr R isn't here. Not that it's likely since Mr R is more than happy to make an example of someone if they step out of line.

We quickly head through the hallways and out to the cars. Luc is right; we're pushing it slightly when it comes to getting to Serendipity with enough time to make sure that we satisfy the moms and get to Luc's place before it gets dark.

Whenever we drive back to Serendipity, I always get this sense of nostalgia that washes over me as memories of the time that we spent here and of coming back here play through my mind. Sure, there were some scary times, like with Jeremy, the yellow-haired freak, but even the memory of him is tinted with good as I remember what Atlas did in order to make sure that I'd stay safe and would never have to fear again. There are definitely more good memories than bad, and I don't think I'd change much if I could go back and do it again.

All of the choices and decisions that we made years ago have led us to

where we are now, and I love our lives. I love that we live together, I love the family that we have made, and I love that we get to do a job that we all love and that helps people, too. I honestly never thought that I'd find a job where my unique set of skills could be put to good use and not just used to harm.

Yeah, coming back to Serendipity always reminds me of how lucky we are and how if I'd decided not to come back here when my father was killed and disappeared or gone to D instead, then my life would be very different right now. Looking back, it never even crossed my mind to go to D, and that would've been the logical choice; I think on a subconscious level, I knew where I needed to be, and it was in Serendipity with the guys and their parents.

As we pull up outside of Jenny and Rob's house, Cash asks with a smile, "How likely do you think it's going to be that we manage to get out of here within an hour?"

Trick chuckles from the passenger, "I think it's highly unlikely, but that's why we scheduled for two hours, just in case."

"And we'll be lucky if they let us get away with that," I add as I reach for the door handle and get out.

The others pull up just after us, and we all walk to the house together.

"Kids!" Jenny greets, immediately pulling Trick into her arms first, while Kat does the same with Cash before they go through the rest of us, giving us all hugs, even Alaric, who seems a bit shocked.

"We know you can't stay long, but we've set up some snacky bits in the kitchen and, of course, coffee," Kat says as she starts to lead us through the house, as comfortable here as she is at her own home.

"Where are the others?" Jensen asks.

"No one else could get out of work on such short notice, especially since you guys can't stay for too long anyway. They all send their love, though." Jenny replies.

We spend the next hour or so catching up on the little things that we've missed in the short time since we last saw them. As always, it's really nice to catch up with them, and when it is time for us to leave to head to Luc's place, I'm reluctant to go. We do need to get going though; if I were in Luc's position, I'd like to get this over and done with as quickly as possible.

After we've said goodbye to Jenny and Kat, who both have to get back to work, we split up into the separate cars again, and this time, I make sure that I'm in the same car as Luc. He smiles as I slide in next to him and

immediately pulls me over so that I'm sitting right next to him in the back seat; as he grabs my hand and threads his fingers through mine, holding tightly. Atlas doesn't need directions to get to Luc's place; he lived in town and hung out with the guys for long enough to know where it is.

When we get to the lavish and, quite frankly, gaudy gates that have his parent's initials on them in cursive, Luc gets out of the car and types in the code, getting back in as they slowly start to open. I don't know why, but I kind of expected the gates to be open, although the more I think about it, the more I realise that probably wouldn't have been a good idea because it could have encouraged looters and all sorts of people thought it was an easy target.

"Are you ready for this?" Rage asks from the front seat as we come to a stop outside of the huge flared steps that lead to the front door of the colossal house. It's easy to see why he calls this place the mausoleum from the outside alone.

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess," Luc replies, and then adds as he gets out of the car, "let's get this over with."

As everyone else gets out of their cars to join us, we all share a concerned look, unsure how he's going to react to this. Hopefully, he's going to be okay. I don't think any of us want to see him struggle, especially here with what memories could be brought up.

Luc

Walking up to the front door, I actually feel better than I thought I would about being here, but for some reason, that makes me nervous. I grabbed my key from home before we left, and I'm assuming that it will still work since Alaric didn't tell me any different. I know that the others are worried about me, and I get it. I would be too. A lot of shit went down in this house, stuff that I don't want to remember, but I think as long as I can get in and out reasonably quickly, I'll be okay.

I hear the lock disengage, but before I can open the door, Ever's phone rings. She looks down at the screen, and I can tell from the face that she's pulling that whoever is calling her is a surprise and not someone that she expected.

Looking up at the rest of us, she says, “It’s Liam.”

Alaric frowns heavily, “You’d better answer it.”

Instead of doing what he’s suggested, she looks at me, and I nod, “Yeah, answer it, the house isn’t going anywhere.”

She nods and then presses a couple of buttons on her phone until we hear Liam’s voice come through the speaker.

“Hello,” Liam greets, and without waiting for any of us to respond, he says, “First, I would like to apologise.”

I know my eyebrows aren’t the only ones that hit my hairline because what the hell? He wants to apologise? Atlas and Alaric look shocked, although Alaric looks more confused than shocked, and that makes me wonder what he knows. Out of all of us, he’s got more history with Liam. He grew up with him, after all, so he knows him better than any of us.

“Apologise?” Atlas is the one to question.

Anger permeates his tone as he replies, “Yes, I made the mistake of trusting someone that I shouldn’t in giving me the right information to pass on to you.”

“You mean about the charity dinner?” Trick asks for clarification.

“Yes. Hunt got a tip from one of my people that you were all in attendance. Apparently, the idiot has no sense of loyalty. He’s been dealt with,” Liam replies.

“Liam,” Alaric’s voice comes out full of warning.

Amusement fills Liam’s voice, as well with a certain amount of affection that surprises me, “Calm down, little brother; he was merely taught a much needed lesson. His heart still beats.”

“Good,” Alaric replies, and I swear I catch a hint of emotion that I wouldn’t expect. It almost matches Liam’s affection but is more guarded.

I’m not the only one who picks up on the odd interaction either; everyone else is watching Alaric curiously, and he’s studiously not looking in any of our directions; he knows that we’ve picked up on something.

“I still have people trying to find out where Hunt is lying low, and as soon as I get visual confirmation myself, I will let you know,” Liam replies.

“That’s surprisingly helpful,” Atlas points out, saying what we’re all thinking.

Liam’s laughter is sarcastic as he replies, “I have been known to be helpful, more than you probably realise. Anyway, I’ll be in touch when I have an update for you.”

Once again, Liam leaves us in silence, and I shake my head, “You know, I think there’s a lot more to him than we ever assumed there was.”

Atlas frowns, his eyebrows furrowed, as he replies, “I actually agree with you, and I grew up with the fucker. It’s making me twitchy.”

“I’m not surprised,” Cash admits.

While everyone agrees, I can’t help but notice that Alaric stays quiet. If we need to know whatever he does, then I assume that he’ll tell us, but I don’t think that whatever it is he’s not saying has any relevance to the case but is more of a personal nature, which means that it’s between Atlas and Alaric.

I know that Ever is starting to worry about them both because there are tiny frown lines between her eyebrows as she watches them closely.

“Alright, let’s do this, Luc are you ready?” Trick asks me, his eyes studying me closely; it seems like there’s a lot of that going on at the moment. But then again, there’s been a lot of personal stuff coming up for several of us with this case. After this is all cleared up, I could really do with something easy, a predictable case, something that we’ve done a thousand times before, and I bet the guys all feel the same.

“Yeah, follow me,” I say as I turn around, and giving myself no time to hesitate or change my mind, I open the door and walk inside.

I give myself a moment just to look around and acknowledge that it really is exactly the same as it was the last time I was here, although there is now a layer of dust that covers everything that my father would hate, and my mother would be screaming at the maids about. I wait for that trepidation to hit me, like it always used to whenever I stepped foot in here, but it doesn’t, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

“You okay?” Alaric asks me, his tone soft.

I turn back to look at the concerned faces of my family and smile, “Yeah, actually I am. Follow me; the first place that I know they haven’t checked is through here and, predictably enough, in the library.”

“Are you sure?” Alaric asks as they all follow me through the wide hallways, “I remember helping to check in there, and we were pretty thorough. We wanted to get any evidence that we could to tie your father and Blake together and make sure that they both went away for the maximum time.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. My father liked hidey holes and secret spaces that he thought no one knew about,” I reply, rolling my eyes, “the thing is, I’ve always had a knack for sneaking around, and I was a curious child and

teenager, so as soon as I realised he was up to no good and not just an asshole father, I started spying on him.”

“That’s smart,” Alaric says. “Why didn’t you say anything when we raided the place?”

“Ever had been taken by Blake, my father, and his place was the last thing on my mind. To be honest, I had completely forgotten about the hiding spaces until the charity dinner. Otherwise, I would've mentioned it before,” I reply, not liking to think about the time in our lives when Ever was taken.

Alaric immediately looks regretful as he replies, “I’m sorry I forgot that happened at the same time.”

“No worries,” I reply, wanting to move on quickly from this subject before something gets said that triggers Ever. I push open the door to the library and head over to the window. This room, unlike the rest of the house, is decorated with dark wood paneling and a traditional office feel. As such, the window sills in here are deep, not enough to sit on but wide enough to store papers in.

Everyone watches me curiously as I crouch down on the left side of the window and start to pick at the corner of one of the panels before I give up and pull out my knife and start to pry it off. I exclaim in triumph as I finally get it off and reach inside, pulling out a binder of papers.

Opening it up, I flick through it, and when it becomes clear that there isn’t any information about Hunt or anything that could help, I hand it off to Alaric.

“There’s nothing in there about Hunt, but there might be something else that could help you with another part of his case,” I tell him.

“Okay, I’ll make sure that we get it to the right people at headquarters,” Alaric says as he takes it off me.

“Is that the only place we have to check?” Pete asks and then adds hastily, “This place freaks me out. It’s all white and echoey apart from in here, and it’s so empty. I don’t like it.”

“Trust me, I know exactly what you mean,” I reply with a sharp grin, “there’s one more place that we can check. Otherwise, we’ve hit a dead end.”

“Again,” Ever grumbles, and I smile.

“It’s definitely getting frustrating now,” I sympathize with her.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ever

As we follow Luc out of the room and back through the house before heading upstairs, I realise that he's actually doing a lot better than he thought he would be and that maybe he was right back at headquarters when he said that he thought he needed to come here for closure. I really hope that he manages to get some; nothing good can come from clinging onto the past.

We all wait as he opens the double doors at the end of the hallway. I don't think any of us expect to see what we do when the doors swing open. The room is in disarray, and standing in the middle of it is a man wearing a balaclava who looks just as shocked as we are. He clearly has some survival instincts though, because he suddenly bolts, jumping over the mess that I'm assuming he's made and heading toward the balcony. Luc and Jensen immediately chase after him while the rest of us turn on our heels and head back out of the room.

I race down the hallway with the others, and we make it outside just in time to see Jensen tackle the guy and pin him to the floor. I have a momentary panic that he's hurt himself, but the giant grin on his face easily lets me know that he's absolutely fine and damn pleased that he was able to tackle someone.

"I'm just going to make a call to headquarters. The cameras should've alerted them that someone else was here," Alaric says when it becomes clear that the situation is in hand.

"Good idea," Trick replies from the doorway, having caught up since he's moving on crutches. "Jensen and Luc, take him inside and make sure he's secure. Please wait for us before you question him though. The rest of you spread out around the perimeter and check down the street to see if he was alone."

"Yes, boss," we all chime in together.

Everyone does as we've been told, and I end up with Cash as we move

around the side of the huge house.

“I doubt that anyone would still be hanging around,” I say as we search for any sign of someone else or of any activity at all.

“No, it’s unlikely, but something tells me that he’s not exactly highly trained. I mean, he didn’t hear us coming, and we weren’t being overly quiet. He should’ve been aware that we were in the house. Because he wasn’t, it also suggests that he doesn’t have anyone else with him. Otherwise, they would’ve alerted him to the fact that we were there when we first turned up.” Cash replies.

“Really good points, all of them. I’d be chastising us for not checking the house, but in all honesty, we’re supposed to have cameras here that are checking for things like intruders. So, someone at headquarters fucked up,” I add, as we carry on looking but don’t find anything apart from the obvious signs of someone using the trellis and climbing up to the bedroom window.

“And I bet that Alaric is giving someone a fucking earful for it right now,” Cash smirks before he adds, “Come on, there’s nothing out here. Let’s head back inside and see what this guy was doing here and who he’s associated with.”

I eagerly agree, more curious than anything. It’s obvious this guy isn’t a legitimate threat, so I highly doubt that he has anything to do with Hunt, but that does make me wonder who he is working for and if there’s another party involved that is somehow interested in something that is here and why they are.

We meet Riot and Rage on the way in, and they confirm that they didn’t find anything either, just as we expected.

“I wonder where they’ve taken him,” Rage says as we walk into the house.

“We’re in here,” Trick calls, obviously having heard the front door go.

We follow the sound of his voice down the hallway a short way and then walk into what looks to be a formal front room. In the middle of the room, tied to a chair and looking nervous as hell, is the guy who escaped without his balaclava. Everyone else is already here, so I assume that means that they didn’t find anything of any interest either. The only person missing is Alaric, but before I can question if everything is okay with him, he walks in with a frown on his face and crosses his arms.

“What happened?” Trick asks.

It’s safe to talk around him, considering that he’s not going to be set free

regardless, and Alaric knows not to give anything sensitive away. He taught us, after all.

Alaric sighs, “Headquarters fucked up. They said that the cameras went down a couple of hours ago, and they assumed that it was us, so they didn’t bother to check anything or alert anyone.”

“Seriously?” Trick asks incredulously, “It’s the protocol to check the cameras and the reason why they went down, even if it’s assumed that we know the reason why.”

“I know,” Alaric replies, “I chewed them out for it, and Mr R will too as soon as he picks up his messages.”

“Good,” Trick replies.

The whole time they’re talking, the guy is getting twitchier as he realises that we’re not normal people who happen to have caught him trespassing. He seems to realise that he’s fucked up, and we’re not people that you want to mess with.

“They’re sending transport for this guy since we don’t have anything appropriate to transport him in here,” Alaric says, his steely gaze locked on the guy who is now sweating, “they should be here shortly. There was someone in the area.”

“Perfect, we should be done with him by then,” Trick smirks.

All of our attention goes to the guy as Atlas takes a step forward and opens his mouth in order to start questioning him before he can though the guy speaks.

“Who the fuck are you people?” he questions and then shakes his head rapidly, “Never mind, I don’t want to know. It’s probably better that I don’t know. I didn’t get paid enough for this, and it’s way out of my comfort zone as it is, and I should’ve known better.”

Atlas holds up his hand, making him flinch and clamp his mouth shut, “Alright, why are you here? Start from the beginning.”

The guy eyes us warily but doesn’t even attempt to stay quiet as he answers the question, “Mr Carmicheal was put in contact with me and asked that I collected something important from his home. He said he had some important information on someone incredibly powerful in the crime world and that he needed to destroy it because something was happening with this person, and if Mr Carmicheal were caught with the information, then he’d be dead.”

I raise my eyebrows. Well, that was more information than I thought we

were going to get off him, and I'd be willing to bet that the guy Luc's dad is concerned about is Hunt.

"He told you the information was here?" Atlas asks.

The guy nods quickly, looking relieved that we're only asking him questions and not torturing him for information. I mean, we would if he was being difficult, but since he's not, there's no need to, and there's no sense in harming someone when it's not absolutely necessary.

"Yeah, he could only get a short message out. I mean the dudes in prison, so all he could tell me is that it's in the bedroom at the end of the hallway, but he didn't say where and honestly, I spent fucking ages trying to find it." The guy replies, not looking happy about the predicament that he's found himself in.

"So you disabled the cameras?" Trick asks him.

"Yeah, it's not hard to do. That is something that I'm more comfortable with," he replies with a shrug.

"How did he find you?" Atlas asks curiously. We've got all of the information that we needed, but since he's so chatty, we may as well try to get some more information out of him so we can give as much as possible to the agents that deal with him after he's been picked up.

Although I doubt that whoever interviews him after us is going to have much trouble getting him to talk, he's not exactly a hardened criminal. He seems to know that he's in far too deep and this is more than he can handle, and instead of clamming up and refusing to say anything, he has decided to cooperate and answer everything that we've asked. It's a smart move, and it will work in his favor.

"There's a guard in the prison that gets out messages and other things for inmates; he's the one that got the message out, and then I picked it up," the guy explains.

"We need the name of the guard at the prison and any others that do similar things," Alaric orders.

Once again, the guy's head nods rapidly as if he can't answer quickly enough, "Yes, of course. I can do that."

"Jensen and Luc, stay with him for a moment," Trick orders and then gestures for the rest of us to follow him out of the room.

The two of them nod as the guy nervously watches Jensen play with a knife. I actually see him gulp as he tries to shift on the seat, only to immediately stop when Jensen pauses and raises his eyebrow at him. I try to

hide my smile. My happy go lucky man knows exactly what he's doing and just how intimidating he can be.

We walk far enough away that we can talk without being heard.

"Well, he's clearly happy to talk," I point out needlessly.

"Oh, for sure. No one is going to have trouble with getting him to give them any information he has," Pete replies, sounding somewhat amused.

"It is concerning that someone at the prison is passing messages. Although it does make sense, they've had an internal investigation going on for a while because they've had a few low-level security breaches. This explains why." Alaric replies and frowns as the thought only just occurs to him.

"At least the guy is going to prove pretty useful," Rage points out.

"So, what's the plan now?" Cash asks.

We all look at Trick, "We wait here until he gets picked up so that we can pass the information that we have onto them, and then we go and see if we can find what the guy was looking for."

"There's obviously something worth finding if Luc's father went to all this trouble and took the risk in order to get it back. He would've known that something big was going on with Hunt and that people were getting closer to taking him down. Mr Carmichael could've easily not said anything and kept the information to himself. Instead, he's so concerned about what information he has on Hunt that he risked being linked to him in order to destroy it." Rafe says.

Hope goes through me, "I really hope that we've finally caught the break that we need."

"Me too," Riot agrees and then looks at Alaric, "how long until the transport arrives?"

"Any minute now, there was someone close by, but their job went bust, so they've got the empty transport van," Alaric replies.

"Good. Riot and Rafe go outside and wait for them," Trick orders.

"On it," Rafe replies as they both move down the hallway and toward the front door.

"We better get back in there. Hopefully, Luc knows exactly where those papers that the intruder was looking for are," Peter suggests, and we all head back toward the room.

The front door opens before we can get there, and Rafe and Riot walk in with a couple of agents.

"Alaric," one of them greets with a smile.

“Toby, it’s been a while.” Alaric replies, as he shakes his hand in greeting and then adds, “I’ll fill you in on what we know so far, and then you can take him.”

“Great, thanks, man.” The other one replies.

We leave them to it and head back into the front room to see Luc looking highly amused as Jensen throws knives at the massive portrait of Luc’s parents above the fireplace. The guy in the chair is sheet white as he stares at the two of them, and I’m guessing that, in part, it’s because of just how many knives are in the painting. There must be at least seven, and even I didn’t know that Jensen had that many on him, although I’m not surprised; he loves his knives.

“Not quite what I meant when I said to watch him,” Trick says as we walk into the room, and although he tries to sound stern, there’s no hiding the amusement in his tone.

“Well, you didn’t say not to,” Jensen argues with his signature smirk.

Luc chuckles, “Besides, I think this painting looks a hell of a lot better with knives in it, don’t you?”

“Oh, it’s definitely an improvement,” I agree with a smile.

“I think you scared our friend, though,” Atlas points out, and the guy in the chair remains frozen.

Before anyone can add anything else, Alaric walks in with the other two agents, who quickly take in the scene and then chuckle.

“Looks like you guys are having fun,” one of them says with a grin.

“We’ll get this guy out of your hair and leave you to it.” the other one adds as they grab the guy and start to walk him out.

“Thanks, guys,” Trick calls after them, and they nod.

Before they’re entirely out of earshot though, I hear the intruder say, “I don’t know where you’re taking me or what you’re going to do with me, but it has to be a lot less terrifying than whatever the fuck that was, those guys are insane.”

Both of the agents burst out laughing before one of them says, “You’ve got no idea. That was nothing.”

I can’t help the giant smile on my face. I’m actually kind of proud that we have the reputation, especially since it’s not exactly wrong.

“Well, that was fun,” Jensen grins as he hops up on the fireplace and starts pulling knives out of the painting and putting them away in multiple places on his body.

I watch in fascination as they all disappear, and once again, apart from the ones that he's left deliberately on show, you wouldn't know how armed he was.

"I'm glad you guys had some fun," Trick chuckles and then starts to head for the door, "Come on, let's go and see what we can find in that room."

We all follow him out of the room as Luc replies, "I only got a glance of the room before Jensen, and I chased him out, but I don't think he found the place that I was thinking of, and he definitely didn't have anything on him, when Jensen tackled him."

"Well, let's hope that's true." Alaric replies.

When we get upstairs to the room, we all just stand back as we watch Luc walk through the mess and kick things out of the way. Every now and then, he taps on the floor with his foot, and I share a slightly confused look with the others. This room is entirely carpeted.

"Everything okay?" Cash asks him curiously.

Luc looks up at us, and I don't know what expressions we have on our faces, but it makes him smile as he explains, "I know I look crazy, but I promise there's a reason for it. I just can't remember exactly where it is."

We all stay silent as we carry on watching him. Finally, he exclaims in triumph, and I have no idea why because that tap sounded no different than any of the taps that he's been making. He drops to his knees and pulls out his knife as soon as he gets to the floor, we watch as he pries at the carpet, and I start to wonder whether he's not sure where it is anymore. I mean, god knows how long it's been since he's actually seen the hidey hole that he's thinking of.

It takes him a minute, but he finally pulls up a perfect square of carpet, which is surprisingly large.

"Dude, I know you know what you're doing, but I'm starting to question it," Jensen says as the carpet reveals just a square of what looks like a typical hardwood floor underneath.

Luc shoots Jensen a look before giving him the finger and then starting to pry along one of the edges with his knife. Nothing happens for a while, and I know he's getting frustrated, so it's not surprising when he clutches his knife in his hand and stabs it into the middle of the square.

"Luc," Peter says, a slight hint of concern in his tone.

Luc grins as he lifts his knife, and the whole piece comes up, "Not crazy."

"Never thought you were, man," Rage grins, making the rest of us

chuckle.

We all head over to him to look in the hole. I don't know about anyone else, but I am infinitely curious about what could be down there.

"It's a safe," Trick mutters.

"No shit, Sherlock," Cash retorts, making Trick flip him off.

"Please tell me you know the code?" Alaric asks.

"I could probably get us into it, but it's going to take me a while. Unless we can move the whole thing and get Ace to do it, he'd probably be able to get in within minutes." Jensen adds.

"That's a good point. It won't be easy to get it out of here though," Atlas says.

"Guys," Luc interrupts, raising his eyebrows at us, "I know the code."

"Oh, thank fuck, that was getting complicated," Jensen sighs in relief.

Rafe smacks him lightly, "Dude, you're the one that was making it complicated."

As Jensen opens his mouth to retort, Trick interrupts, his voice stern, "Can we just see what's in the safe, please?"

"Sorry," Jensen mutters.

Luc already has it opened and starts to flick through the very thick file that's the only one that's stored in there.

"Anything useful?" Alaric asks.

Luc's eyebrows are in his hairline as his eyes stay glued to the papers, and he nods his head, "Oh yeah. This is all about Hunt; there's loads in here. As you guys know, my father was in the import-export business. This has the ports that he used listed and who they belonged to." He turns the file around and points to one on the list as he says, "This one he has listed as belonging to Hunt."

The excitement in the room starts to rise as Atlas asks, "Do you think there's a chance that Hunt still uses it?"

"Well, it's in a prime location, and it would be hard to establish something so big and well run somewhere else," Luc replies as he reads over the details.

Finally, we have a solid lead.

"Well, there's one way to find out. Let's go and check it out," Trick suggests.

Luc

We finally have a lead, and as I continue to read, my hope grows that this might be over soon, and Hunt will finally be taken care of.

My eyes blur, and I blink rapidly, trying to clear them when they don't clear right away, and my head starts to feel heavy. I realise that there's something very wrong.

"Guys," I say, my voice sounding like it's in a tunnel as my vision darkens further, "something is wrong."

"What!" Ever exclaims, but I'm incapable of replying as I feel my body slump to the side, the file falling to the side.

Just as I feel unconsciousness claw at me, I manage to get out, "Don't touch the file."

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Uncovered Truths (The Lost Ones) Book 2
Home (Finding My Home) Book 1

About the Author

Nikita Parmenter lives in England, with her four children and two puppies. Coffee and cinnamon buns are what keep her going. Her Characters all have a special place in her heart and quite often enjoy throwing her curve balls that send the plot line in a completely different direction than she had originally planned, and she loves it! Not as crazy as it sounds, I promise. She writes, Paranormal Reverse harem, Contemporary Reverse Harem and has a Reverse Harem bully romance in the works too. She loves writing strong take no sh*t female character's that have become that way through fighting tooth and nail to survive and damaged alpha males with hearts of gold buried underneath all their jagged edges. Connect with Nikita via her Facebook page [Nikita Parmenter Author](#) or Instagram [nikitaparmenterauthor](#). There will be competitions, giveaways, POV's from some of our favourite guys, Bonus scenes and updates on when the next book's will be out! Please leave a review if you get the chance, it would mean the world to me! Thank you so much for reading.