

VICTORY

AT PRESCOTT HIGH

THE HAVOC BOYS BOOK FIVE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

C.M. STUNICH

There's one heart you can't break at Prescott High, not
unless you're one of them.

The Havoc Boys.

They're my family, my redemption, and my future.

Victory at Prescott High has always meant escape.
Once upon a time, that meant graduation and a one-
way ticket out of town.

But everything is different now.

This year, my life changed in irrevocable ways.
The Havoc Boys have a Havoc Girl; they have a queen
who wears her crown with pride.
I 'll need every ounce of strength I possess to dig us out
of an early grave.

One last chance; one more fight.
If there really are happy endings for people from my
side of the tracks, then we 'll find one.
Or else we 'll go down together in a hail of gunfire.

Blood in, blood out.
Always.

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VICTORY

AT PRESIDENT HIGH

THE HAVOC BOYS, #2

C.M. STUNICH
INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Victory at Prescott High

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so many people helped inspire this series.

*this book is dedicated to the people I love that helped bring these characters
to life.*

*it's also dedicated to the people who hurt me so much that I had to write to
free myself.*

you made me bleed; you crushed me; I forgive you.

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Author's Note

Possible Spoilers

Victory at Prescott High is the final book in the *Havoc Boys* series. For better or worse, you'll get to see them have the ending they were always meant to have. The Havoc Boys might be dicks, but they have most definitely found a permanent place in my heart. And Bernadette? Well shit, she will always be one of my favorite leading ladies.

These characters found me while I was in the shower, so compelling that I had to hop out and grab my phone, just so I could write it down and keep it close. After that point, there was no escaping. This story *needed* to be told, and I'll be forever proud that I was allowed to share it with you.

If you haven't tried any of my other high school romance series—*Rich Boys of Burberry Prep*, *Devils' Day Party*, or *Adamson All-Boys Academy*—then I highly recommend checking them out. Next up, I'll be writing the final two books in my *Death by Daybreak Motorcycle Club* series. The first book is *I Was Born Ruined*, and the story is very similar to Havoc in tone, grittiness, and characterization.

Thank you again for joining me on Bernadette's journey.

Now.

This no mare's nest, okay? This is a good thing.

Cry some motherfucking 'Havoc!' and let slip the dogs of war!

Blood in, blood out.

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CHAPTER

ONE

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Callum Park

Five minutes earlier ...

The man with the garrote wrapped around my neck is a clever animal.

He got the jump on me; that isn't easy to do. Kudos to him. I would laugh, if I were able to breathe with the sharp metal sting of piano wire digging into my throat. My attacker turns to the right and twists the wires against my neck, cutting off my air supply and spilling ruby red down the front of me.

This guy, he's an expert.

But me? I'm a dark god.

If I were anyone else—even Oscar or Victor—I might be dead. What this man doesn't know is that I've been garroted before. The day I lost my dreams forever, a boy from Fuller High—the boyfriend of my dance partner—used a chain to garotte me from behind. I didn't know then what I know now. Instead, all I can remember is the feel of the cool metal against my neck, and then the horrid sensation of a baseball bat connecting with my left knee.

The feel of someone touching my throat now triggers all of the darkness I keep so carefully coiled inside of me. Why I have so much of it, I'm not sure. Oscar has a past steeped in pain and desperation, memories of a dead mother's arms and a shallow grave. What do I have to compete? A grandmother who raised me well, despite the fact that she's a killer herself? A beautiful dream stolen by jealous and violent hands?

But, regardless, my hoodie might as well be death's cloak. On the inside, I'm nothing more than a broken doll with an obsession. *You're keeping me from finding my Bernadette*, the monster hisses as the man behind me—likely some sort of enforcer for the Grand Murder Party—attempts to throw me over his back. If that happens, I won't be getting out of this. Bernadette will find out that I've died at the school, bleeding from a second smile on my throat.

If my being alive is what makes her happy, being alive is how I'll remain.

Luckily, I've been blessed from birth with lightning quick reflexes and easy strength. I'm not sure how or why, but there's just something about the shape of me that once helped create a brilliant dancer. In the same vein, it makes me a beautiful killer.

Anticipating my opponent's movements, I twist my body in unison with his, as if we're performing some sort of dark tango on the hood of a Prescott employee's car. My left fist connects with my attacker's groin; he grunts but the pressure on my neck does not lessen. I count to eight inside my head, like I'm in the middle of an encore performance. *Hot lights, an eager but faceless audience, a final curtain.*

The wire is still around my neck, biting in, making me bleed. Without having to think about it, my body acts on its own, anticipating the dance-like movements of a proper fight.

It really can be beautiful, can't it? Watching two people move together like they're one? In some cases, they're dancing. In some cases, they're fighting for their lives. Either way, it's art in the human form, an art of movement and, occasionally, blood.

My right palm slams into the man's ear, and then I kick out as hard as I can, making contact with his groin yet again. He falls off the side of the car, and the garrote comes loose. I scramble to pull it off, crimson drenching my hands. I'm bleeding heavily, but my carotid is intact. For now. I'd hate to end my life like Danny Ensbrook, drowned in a pool of violent red.

The man on the ground is dressed all in black, but inconspicuously so. Just a pair of black jeans, a plain black t-shirt. Unremarkable. His hair is brown, his eyes the same color. I wouldn't be able to pick him out of a crowd.

Russ Bauer, one of the enforcers for the GMP.

That's who this is.

I'm an erudite killer, after all. I've memorized every bit of intel our crew's managed to dredge up. This man's skills with the garrote are what give him away. That, and his almost exceptionally banal expression.

A smile crests my lips as I lift my pistol up in both hands to take a shot. I'll admit: I'm flattered. If Maxwell Barrasso is sending this man after me, he must think I'm dangerous.

Good for him.

Because I very much am.

Russ slides beneath the car, moving so quickly that I don't bother pulling the trigger. I'm only taking shots I think I can make right now; ammunition is sorely limited. Instead, I hop down and spin, aiming beneath the car and firing at the briefest flicker of shadow and light.

That's when my second attacker appears, a much less careful monster that

stumbles around the corner with his gun drawn. *Exhale, Cal.* I'm getting frustrated here: my only goal—and I mean *only* goal—is to protect Havoc. Bernadette, in particular. These men are wasting my time.

I squander one of my beautiful bullets putting a shot through the head of the newcomer; he drops to the pavement like a boneless doll. By the time I've turned back toward Russ, I can see him removing a handgun of his own as he balances on the hood of the car once more.

Too late.

My finger's pulling the trigger before he can even line up a shot. Blood blooms on his hand, knocking the pistol to the pavement beside the vehicle's front tire. He stumbles, but he's smart enough to use the movement to leap down and throw himself into me.

His hand grasps for my gun, but I chuck it as far as I can, freeing my wrist from his grip and clocking him in the face so hard that I feel bone crunch.

“What the *fuck?!*” Russ snarls, clearly unused to engaging with anyone on his level.

That's what makes Havoc so dangerous. Nobody expects us. Nobody sees us coming.

That's how we're going to win this war, a quiet but unrelenting assault in the dark. After all, a venomous spider can kill a grown man with a single bite while he sleeps. What makes us any different than that?

When I was jumped by those boys, when they broke my knees and took turns pissing on me, I couldn't defend myself the way I wanted to. All those months of lying in bed, racked with pain or numbed with painkillers, I kept my phone in my hand and I watched videos. I read books. And then I got out of bed, and I started to imitate all the things I'd learned.

You'd be surprised what a little personal growth can do for you.

Like I said, educated monster. Knowledge is truly motherfucking power.

This guy, Russ, though, he's an enforcer. His job is to keep gang members in line, deal with rivals, and dispose of informants. He knows what he's doing, too. So, he crosses his ankles together beneath my knees to hold me in place, and then backhands me with an easy, fluid movement that has me tasting blood.

I'm so dizzy there for a minute that I can feel it, her name perched on the edge of my lips. *Bernadette.* I would quite literally murder the world for her. Acting on instinct, I bend my leg at the knee and use my heavy boot to kick

down at Russ' crossed ankles. He grunts, but he's wearing leather boots as well, so I don't quite get to break his ankle the way I planned on.

Another kick and I've at least got his legs uncrossed. My back arches like I'm possessed, and in the back of my head, I can hear the taunting murmur of children playing London Bridge. *The London bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down...*

I flip Russ over with the movement, but he's still got his legs wrapped around me. Using both fists, I smash them down into his face. Bone shifts, blood runs. He slips a knife from his belt and thrusts it hard and quick toward my midsection.

Tatted fingers wrap his wrist, the letters of *HAVOC* inked into my knuckles. With my other hand, I snatch the knife and spin it until it's pointing down at his neck.

"Will!" Russ shouts, and that's the only warning I get before I feel a breeze at my back. *There's another one.* Somebody sent the cavalry after us, didn't they? I can't, for the life of me, imagine why. But politicking isn't my forte. I'd much rather make people bleed.

My body falls to the side just as Will—another name I recognize from crew intel—hops down from the roof. He doesn't shoot at me because he'd just as likely kill Russ. Interesting. A bit of loyalty.

I swipe my hand across my bloodied lips and smile.

"I'm impressed," I say as I retrieve my pistol with my right hand and stand up. "I wasn't certain there was any loyalty left among thieves." *Except for Havoc, of course. Blood in, blood out. Always.*

"This kid is fucking nuts," Russ says, choking on blood and snorting as it pours from his nose in two crimson rivulets. "Blow his fucking brains out."

Will—a man just as ordinary as his buddy—removes an assault rifle from over his shoulder.

Too bad he doesn't know all the things I do.

A gunshot takes him between the eyes as Oscar fires a round from the roof. I tilt my head back so I can stare at him upside down. He adjusts his aim and shoots at Russ, but when I drop my chin to look, I find the man halfway down the alley already.

"Victor's got Bernadette, and the fucking VGTF is here."

Ahh. A smile lights up my mouth. *Victor.* I trust our leader with Bernadette. A strange sort of calm settles over me, soothing some of that

exquisite ache in my blood that screams at me to find Bernie, hold her, fuck her. Wetting my lips, I exhale and let those emotions go—for now. There'll be plenty of time later for finding and holding and fucking, but in this moment, all I need is the violence.

I turn around to look up at Oscar, finding the white parts of his suit speckled with blood. Doesn't show as much on the black. Isn't that nice? That there's a color you can wear that helps hide the bloodstains.

“Roger that, O.”

Oscar pauses and turns his head sharply, gritting his teeth in response to something. And then he's gone, and the sound of footsteps behind me is drawing my attention around. Three men come around the corner, pausing when they see me standing there, dressed in a hoodie and shorts and bleeding from the throat.

I can't beat them all, not like this. My head is whirling and swimming, but I keep my mind focused through sheer force of will. Turning on my heel, I take off after Russ. I'm faster than the men chasing me, and that's my only advantage right now.

Cupping one hand against my mouth, I let out a howl. A lone wolf in need of a pack.

As I round the corner behind the school, another gunshot drops one of the men pursuing me.

Oscar, again.

I keep after Russ. He's the type of person that, once he gets your scent, never stops coming. If he's here now, it's because the GMP has decided that even a taste of Victor's inheritance isn't enough to put up with the risk that is inherently Havoc.

The enforcer pounds the pavement hard, leaving a trail of blood behind him, and then disappears into an abandoned apartment building three blocks down. Not surprising. We are deep in the heart of south Prescott here. I can practically hear its heartbeat, one-part dereliction and one-part unshakeable courage.

I wet my lips and slip around the back of the brick building, weaving my way through a sheet of ivy to climb into a first story window. Two of the men are still behind me, cursing as they struggle with the foliage.

While I wait for them to catch up, I creep through the shadows the way I taught Bernadette. *Move with purpose, but don't rush it. Be unpredictable.*

Never assume you're safe, not even buried in the dark.

“Those little punks killed Will,” a voice is saying, the words echoing from upstairs. The speaker pauses briefly and curses. “He’s in the building with us.”

“Is he?” another voice replies, one that makes my jaw clench and my skin prickle. There are different sorts of monsters. I’ve always found the ones who use sexuality as a weapon to be the worst. Perversion is a terrible, terrible sin.

Who could that be, Callum? I wonder, making my body as small as possible so that I can crawl into the open door of an old sideboard. Carefully, I pull the door closed and then aim my weapon through the crack, waiting. I’m good at that, the waiting part.

It’s what makes me so fucking dangerous.

Rabid dogs that bite too quick are put down.

Two men come down the stairs, the weak light from inside the building doing little to illuminate their features. One of them is clearly Russ. I can tell by the metallic stink of him. The other ... I’m hoping that the wild guess forming in my mind is wrong.

Maxwell Barrasso wouldn’t send his second-in-command to a high school, right?

I mean, if we weren’t so purely and honestly Havoc, then the forces the GMP marched through the doors of Prescott High would’ve been mad overkill. I wet my lips again, squinting to see if I can’t line up a shot.

“Well, where the fuck is he?” Russ asks when the two men that were chasing me finally make their way into the room.

“He came in through the kitchen window,” one of them says, and I notice Russ’ eyes immediately begin a scan of the room. It’s unlikely a man of my size would choose a place like this to hide, but they’ll check here. Not yet, maybe, but soon. “No fucking clue where he is now, but Kody is dead.”

“This the blond kid we’re talking about?”

That voice ... One of our girls said that when she heard Maxwell’s second, Mason Miller, speak for the first time, that she felt like she’d already lost. She said that when she got home, she took a scalding shower and cried as if she’d been assaulted.

And Prescott girls ... they don’t say that sort of shit lightly.

This just has to be Mason Miller.

I aim for his head. Even if I were to die here today—I won’t—then killing

Mason might just make it all worth it. He's one of Maxwell's secret weapons. To remove the threat of the GMP from Springfield, we'll need both Maxwell *and* Mason.

Just as my finger tenses on the trigger, Mason's eyes flick to me. I can't really see his face. Shit, it's bathed in shadow and obscured by dust motes that dance through the early morning air the way I used to, effortless, weightless ...

He drops down just before I pull the trigger, so I don't bother taking the shot. I need this bullet. It's my very last.

Mason rises to his feet in a movement so fluid that I wonder if he, too, was ever a dancer. He moves across the dirty ground, littered with used condoms and needles, and kicks the door in. Bits of wood splinter and dig into my skin, but I barely notice the pain, blue-painted fingers curling around the edges of the opening as I drag myself out and throw my body into Mason.

Maintaining close contact with any one of the men will help reduce my chances of being shot. But grappling with Mason is not the same as grappling with Russ. He manages to get a hand free, hitting up against the bottom of my chin and causing me to bite my tongue. Fresh, hot blood fills my mouth as he throws a punch that likely would've burst my eyeball if it'd made contact. Instead, I manage to avoid it and his fist flies into the wall.

Four against one. Odds that normally wouldn't scare me. But Mason is different. Russ is dangerous. The other two men are just add-ons at this point, but even they're a step-up from the Charter Crew's best and brightest.

An elbow hits me in the chest before I register that Mason's changed his tactics. He's trying to drive me toward a broken window this time, likely in the direction of additional GMP members. I turn and grapple the edge of the staircase, hauling my body up through a break in the spindles and finding my feet even as Russ fires several times in my direction.

Drywall dust fills the air, clouding the few lit spots in the unending darkness of the building. There are so many like this in Prescott. Havoc knows them all. Even before I trip over the first body, I know we lost a few members of our crew in here today.

There's nothing I can do to help the dead, so I don't stop. Instead I continue up the stairs until I hit the metal door that leads to the roof, shoving through it with both palms and surveying the space around me.

About ten years ago, the city started changing its zoning laws to allow

buildings to be built closer and closer together. The apartment next door is practically within touching distance. Neither of them is particularly tall—about five stories—but a fall from here would kill me.

I tilt my head to one side, trying to calculate the odds.

The sound of pursuit behind me makes the decision relatively easy. I'd rather risk falling to my death than end up in Mason's grasp. I'd be lucky to simply die at his hands. Chances are, if he can, he'll take me alive and try to torture Havoc's secrets out of me.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I pull in a deep breath, remembering that day in the studio when I danced for Bernadette like a beast performing some sort of primal mating ritual. I open my eyes again, lips twisting up in a smile. That's what I did, didn't I? Danced. Begged. Pleaded for her to let me touch her the way I've always dreamed of.

That's what drives me when I take a few steps back, brace myself for the jump, and take off for the edge of the roof. Even though it kills my knees and makes me wish I were hopped up on painkillers, I flex my muscles and leap, landing on the gravel surface of the neighboring roof.

Agony screams through me, rippling from the carefully rebuilt knobs of my knees, but I ignore it. I'm used to pain. So used to it, in fact, that when I see it in others—Bernadette's face, for example—I find it beautiful.

Breathtaking, really.

I don't bother rising to my feet, crawling over to a nearby hole and lowering myself into the ruined space until I'm standing on a nest of pine needles and wet drywall. It smells like must and piss in here—typical Prescott—but there's something else, a strange clove and smoke smell that gives me just enough warning to avoid getting my head blown off.

Ducking into an open door, I put myself behind a brick wall, my mind assessing what I just saw.

Mason was there in the dark, in the opposite building. There's a broken window on both my side and his. Likely, right now, he's climbing between the two spaces. That's what I'd be doing, after all. If he's anticipated my movements to a T, then we clearly calculate our next moves in a similar matter.

I heft the handgun from my hoodie pocket, eyes traveling the length of the room, sweeping across the ceiling. I won't be caught unawares from above, not the way I surprised those men in the hallway. I reach up and adjust the

skeleton mask on my face. Like everything else with Havoc, we create our own traditions. Skeleton faces and wolf howls and a girl that's too wild for one boy to possess on his own.

Crawling across the floor, I allow myself to peek around the corner.

I don't see Mason anywhere.

Taking my phone from my pocket, I try to send a text but pause when I hear movement from the next room. Russ appears on the staircase and, from somewhere deeper in the building, I hear the movements of several people. Maybe even a dozen.

I grind my teeth and decide to finish my text.

Mare's nest.

A perfect complement to Bernie's text from earlier. The rest of our group chat is filled with things like *where are you?* and *two men in the gym, stay safe*. I manage to send that off, but that's it. Mason comes up out of a trapdoor about two feet from me. That's when I realize that we're in what amounts to an attic; he's used the access point to surprise me.

My booted foot kicks out and hits him square in the face, but it doesn't faze the man at all. Instead, he grabs onto my ankle, yanks, and uses his bodyweight to let us both fall. We crash into the old wood floors, and then through them, to the next level.

I'm choking and struggling for air, fingers grasping at my side as I feel this rush of white-hot heat and pain. *Shit, shit, shit*. Something stabbed me when I fell. Not Mason's knife, but a piece of wood that's speared me through the shoulder in a way that one might stake a fucking vampire.

"There we go, so you're human after all," Mason murmurs, kicking my gun from my hand. I'm not sure where my phone is anymore. Doesn't matter. I just need to get up and move. I need to run. That's not easy for me to admit, that I'm in over my head. I should not have chased Russ the way I did. *Too cocky, Cal. Don't get too cocky.*

"I was once human," I agree, and then I'm tearing the piece of wood from the wound and plunging it into Mason's thigh. He barely lets out a hiss of pain before he's hitting me across the face and knocking me on my back. I land in a pool of wet blood that splatters across the nearby walls like just another wave of graffiti. *HAVOC* is scrawled in black paint just above it. Marking our territory. Staking our claim.

"Still human, kid," Mason tells me, and then he reaches inside his jacket

for a pistol. The sound of another explosion outside buys me about a tenth of a second. But it's enough for me to turn and retrieve my own gun, rolling onto my back and firing, not at Mason, but at Russ as he rounds the corner with an assault rifle at the ready.

I manage to peg him right between the eyes as Mason turns back to me, frowning so hard in the dark, damp space, I swear I can smell it on him. *Surprise*. He shoots me in the arm, and a gasp escapes my lips, one that reveals the lie I refuse to admit myself: *you are not invulnerable, Callum Park*.

And I'm not. But I wish so fucking desperately that I were that I almost believe it sometimes.

The floor beneath me shifts dangerously as Mason takes a few steps in my direction.

"I think I'll take you home with me," he says, his voice a total deadpan. But his mouth, what little of it I can see in the light that cuts through the boarded-up window, is vicious. Ruthless. Penetrating. Mason lifts the gun to shoot me in the leg, but I slam my boot down on the floor and it collapses.

So does the floor beneath it.

I end up gagging on dust and debris as I scramble out of the pile and down the staircase, stumbling and dripping blood everywhere. On my way toward the front door, I pick up a loose board, swing around the corner with it and hit one of the nameless lackeys in the face with it so hard that I'm wondering if I might've broken his neck.

Regardless, he drops to the floor and I keep going.

When the next man gets in my way, I drop low and throw myself into his belly, keeping him from shooting me as he lands on his back with a gasp. The end of the board in my hand is ragged, bits of splinters and jagged shards of wood at one end. This is what I ram into the soft, white skin of his throat. Once, twice, three times. He's gurgling now, but I don't have the time or leisure to make sure he's dead.

Instead, I'm out the door and blinking into the weak morning sunlight, even as I notice the red and blue wash of police lights in the distance. *The cops are at the school*. The thought brings me some amount of relief. SWAT will come. The VGTF will be there. Reporters.

Bernadette will be safe.

I stumble a little, knowing that I haven't got the energy to make it back to

the school. So what do I do? Where do I go? First, I tear my hoodie over my head, ignoring the screaming pain in my arm and shoulder, utilizing the adrenaline. I press the fabric against the stab wound and keep my bloodied arm tucked against my belly, just to make sure that I don't drip.

The last thing I need right now is to leave a trail that Mason can follow.

Using the brick wall of the building for leverage, I make it as far as I can before I'm forced to duck into the backyard of a foreclosed home.

The world spins around me as I fall to my knees. But I don't stop crawling. Not until I'm falling through a ground-level window that leads into an empty basement. I hit the floor shoulder first and blood splatters everywhere.

Bernadette, I'm coming.

I make that promise, even as my eyes close, and I spiral into the endless black.

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CHAPTER

TWO

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Bernadette Blackbird

I swear to fuck, I am channeling my lover Callum Park as I'm dragged from the building in cuffs, blood raining down my face as I laugh like a demon ripped straight from the gates of hell. *You're hysterical, Bernie, calm down.* But all I want are my boys, just my boys.

"Bernadette," Sara breathes as I'm escorted out the front doors and down the steps. *I just bashed in James Barrasso's head with a fucking doorstep.* That's how it was always supposed to end for that sister-fucker, I think. Killed with a trinket from a National Park. That's how he deserved to go. Motherfucker gave me the creeps.

I let out a piercing howl as the cops manhandle me into the back of an ambulance, one of them climbing in to ride with me and the fidgety looking paramedics. Victor howls right back, and a series of howls echoes around the school. I see my husband, but only briefly, as he's violently shoved into the back of an ambulance in a way that I'm almost certain isn't textbook.

We are not the bad guys here.

We are Havoc.

We *defended* our school. We fought for our city. We are not the ones who should be in handcuffs.

Vic's eyes lock on mine, two obsidian pools that seem to hold the secrets of the universe. The crown is still perched on my bloody head, placed there by his inked hands, a symbol of the unbreakable bond we have. Victor and I, we are impossibly connected, an infinity sign with no beginning and no end.

The doors to his ambulance are slammed shut, and a gasp escapes me at the lack of eye contact. I feel like I've been backhanded. My stomach cramps, and I lick my lips to hold back a groan of pain. I won't show it, not in front of fucking pigs, not in front of Sara Young or Detective Constantine.

Where are my other boys? I need to find my boys.

The adrenaline wears off like a shock of ice water to the face, and I begin to struggle.

"Get these fucking cuffs off of me!" I shout, twisting my body against the force of the metal. "Where are the rest of my boys?" I whip my head around to find Sara Young watching me. Constantine is beside her, but he just curses and scowls when I look their way. "I'm not under arrest here. I didn't do

anything wrong. Let me go.” I pause and wet my lips. I’m feeling saucy today. Actually, when I woke up this morning, I put on a shade of lipstick that reminds me of the brain matter I saw when I shot that GMP motherfucker in the head in the cafeteria.

It’s called *Unhappy Goodbyes*. Who names a lipstick color that? It’s psychotic.

“What happened, Bernadette?” Sara asks, touching the shoulder of the female officer in the ambulance with me. The woman leaves and lets Sara take her place. All I can do is look into her eyes and smile.

“They came for us,” I say as the crown shifts forward on my head. There’s blood all the fuck over me, but most of it isn’t mine. I adjust myself and the cuffs on my wrists clink. Just over Sara’s shoulder, I can see the front of Prescott High.

At times, it’s felt like a prison. During others, a sanctuary.

Maybe, like me, if the school were to have wings, one would be an angel wing, the other the leathery black of a demon. Duality. Life exists in duality.

People are swarming out the front door in droves now, like a flock of songbirds, chased from their home by a hawk. I see Ms. Keating halfway down the block with a gaggle of students. She’s bleeding from her already injured arm, but her chin is up. What do you want to bet that this bitch did something heroic today?

That’s just who she is, I guess, Ms. Breonna Keating.

“Where are my boys?” I repeat to Sara, my eyes briefly meeting the Vice Principal’s inky brown ones. The ambulance doors are slammed shut, and I let out a small snarl of frustration. Police Girl is staring at me like a riddle she’s determined to fucking decipher.

“Who are you?” she asks me after a moment, like she either doesn’t understand the depths of my rage or just doesn’t care. I turn to look at her, my body shaking as the pain really starts to set in. It’s everywhere. I had my ass handed to me today, didn’t I?

“The Queen of Havoc,” I tell her, and then I lean back against the wall and close my eyes. *Where are you, boys?* I wonder as the ambulance jostles down the road. *Where the fuck are you?*

If one of them is gone, so help this universe.

I will rend the fabric of reality to taste vengeance.

I hope Maxwell Barrasso likes his son delivered with a concave head and

no eyes.

Because I am just getting motherfucking *started*.

“Tell me that they’re alive,” I repeat for what’s likely the hundredth fucking time, lifting a hand up and rubbing it across my mouth. I’m used to seeing the bright waxy smear of lipstick on my pale skin. Instead, I’m almost too clean. Scrubbed raw and smelling of powdery soap.

But I had to clean up, didn’t I? After all that blood ...

Sara Young stares at me from across the surface of her countertop. After the cops took pictures of me dressed in copper-scented crimson, and collected my clothes for evidence, I was allowed to come back here to shower.

“You owe me that much, at least,” I say, my tongue scraping across the inside of my mouth like sandpaper. Sara is staring at me with a fresh set of eyes as if she, too, made a snap judgement. As if she, too, underestimated me.

She won’t make that mistake again, unfortunately.

“You know,” she begins, adjusting her position against the opposite counter and dropping her chin to her chest. Her eyes are closed, but I have no doubt that her ears are attuned to my every movement. “I thought I had you all figured out, Bernadette.” Sara looks up suddenly, and her doe-brown eyes don’t look so soft anymore. “You were sad, I could see it in your eyes. That much, I knew for sure.”

“Just tell me if my fucking boys are still alive,” I snap back, wanting to dig my fingers into my scalp until my skin bleeds. But only so that I keep them away from *her*. I want to grab Sara and shake her right now; she knows the suspense is killing me.

Six hours, four minutes, and thirty-two seconds ago, a man shot Stacey Langford in the head, and I ended up spilling more blood at Prescott High than I’ve ever spilled in my life. The police took my phone, and I haven’t been able to get access to a laptop. Shit, I’m so desperate right now that I’d march my ass down to the corner where all the hookers hang out and use the very last payphone in all the city of Springfield. It belongs to Prescott, of course, and it’s used more often for paid fucks than phone calls.

Right now, I’d gladly press that filthy receiver to my ear if that’s what it’d take to hear the voices of my boys. Victor is okay, obviously, but I haven’t

seen him since they put us in separate ambulances and drove us away from the school.

The last thing I saw before the paramedics closed the doors was his face, drawn but determined.

I pick the crown up that Victor gave me and hold it in two hands, staring down at it with a frown taking over my mouth. I don't know why I'm here, at Sara Young's house, instead of the station. Or Aaron's place. Because I'm either under arrest or ... I'm not.

But of all the things they took from me, for some reason, they let me keep this goddamn crown.

I look back up again, but Sara's focus hasn't wavered. She's boring into me with eyes like swords, sharpened and ready for justice.

"You're really and truly invested in all of this, aren't you?" she asks, her tone accusatory, like I've torn apart her perfect little life and dashed her dreams on the rocks of reality. "You're not looking for my help; I'm just an obstacle you need to overcome."

I slip the crown back on my head, just to feel the weight of it. My eyes close of their own accord, and I pull in a deep breath. If someone had asked in August if this is where I'd be in January, sitting on a cop's stool and wearing a crown given to me by one of the darkest minds to ever attend Prescott High, I'd have laughed in their face. What is this? What am I doing?

The thing is, I have those answers now. Pretty sure I've had them all along. But sometimes it takes a traumatic event to really shake you, to wake you up to the reality of who you're supposed to become.

"I haven't done anything wrong," I tell Sara, opening my eyes again. The pretty little cop shifts a bit, as if there's something in my stare that's making her uncomfortable. Good. She should be uncomfortable. She should be terrified. Of Havoc. Of the GMP. Of the fact that she's gotten herself firmly in the crosshairs of our turf war.

I killed James Barrasso; I bashed his head in with Mr. Darkwood's doorstep.

That isn't something Maxwell Barrasso is likely to forgive anytime soon, regardless of the fact that *he* sent his guys to *my* fucking school.

"Bernadette, there are *seventeen* dead men with tattoos linking them to a gang that's made the FBI's most dangerous gangs in America list. Men like that ..." She trails off and then swipes both hands over her face, a rare break

in her white knight hero act. “Why were those men at your school? Hmm? Because the only reason I can gather is that they were after *you*.”

“They were after Stacey Langford,” I say, a pang in my chest when I think of the spunky blonde with the loyal crew. Her girls must be devastated. No sooner has that thought crossed my mind when I welcome another: *we need to bring her girls into Havoc’s fold*. It’s the least we can do, considering everything. Besides, Stacey taught her girls well. They’ll be an asset.

“Stacey Langford,” Sara Young says, grabbing her phone from the counter and scrolling until she, presumably, gets to some sort of file on Stacey. “Eighteen years old, a father with a serious rap sheet, a mother missing under mysterious circumstances, and—”

“Stacey was a good person,” I say, feeling my anger rise to the surface like bubbles in boiling water. I’m liable to scald if Sara pushes me too far tonight. I don’t have the patience for her privileged ass, not when the fates of my boys are so uncertain.

Hael, Aaron, Oscar, or Callum could be dead.

Fuck.

I’m shaking now; I can’t help it. There are few things in this world that can shake me anymore. This, this is one of them. *Don’t you dare leave me heartbroken, you assholes. Don’t you fucking dare.*

“Stacey was a good person,” I repeat, laying my palms flat on the shiny granite surface of the counter. It’s the color of sand, but even less interesting. I hope for Sara’s sake this really is an Airbnb and not her house. It’s so incredibly boring. “She was more than just a file on your phone.” I shake my head. I’ve relived that moment in the hallway several times already inside my mind. Even though I know there was no way I could’ve saved Stacey, I wish things had been different.

“Listen, Bernadette,” Sara starts, drawing in a breath that she holds for so long I’m afraid she might pass out. She finally exhales as she steps forward, putting her hands on the counter just twelve inches from my own. My entire body aches, like I’ve been put through a wash cycle or something. Everything hurts. At least I found out during my exam at Joseph General that I was only coughing up blood because I’d cracked a tooth and bitten my own tongue from the beating. Could’ve been way worse, like internal bleeding and shit. They insisted on drawing blood and running some tests, too, though I’m not exactly sure why that was necessary. “You are not under arrest at this time.

However”—and here she pauses to emphasize that word in a manner that’s quite menacing—“you are a person of interest.”

“Why am I at your house?” I ask, staring at her and wishing this day would just fucking end. I’m *exhausted*. “Is this standard procedure, to bring a *person of interest* to a fed’s house?”

“I’m trying to help you, Bernadette,” she says, pink mouth flat and grim, eyes shadowed in a way they weren’t before she walked into that building today and saw carnage spread out across the decrepit school like it was the fucking end-times. “I brought you here because I have a deal for you.”

Sara turns away and gathers a packet of papers, bringing it over and laying it out in front of me. I look at it for a moment and then adjust my gaze to hers.

“Pardon me, but I don’t speak legal bullshit. What is this?”

“Full immunity for you,” Sara says, tapping her fingers on the pages. “In exchange for information ... and your testimony.”

“Testimony for what?” I ask, feeling my skin prickle with goose bumps. I want to go home. I want to see my boys. Shit, that’s the only thing I can think about right now, going home and curling up in bed with them. If I ask real nice, you think they’d all snuggle up with me together? Stranger things have happened.

“Against Pamela,” Sara says, crossing her arms again. Looks like a defense mechanism to me, all that arm crossing. Like Vic’s chin rubbing, Cal’s hood, Oscar’s iPad ... and the way Stacey Langford stared at her phone with a hollow, distant look in her eyes. *Shit, motherfucker*. We should’ve protected her.

That’s on us.

That day in the cafeteria, when she called off her deal with Havoc, that’ll haunt me forever.

“My mother?” I ask, crinkling my brow. I’m not stupid: I heard what the boys said. Their plan was to pin Neil’s murder on Pamela. If Sara is asking me to testify, then she must have found evidence to support the idea.

“Yes,” Sara says with a long sigh. After a moment, she leaves the room and I’m left to stare at the paperwork in front of me. No way would I ever be an informant or a witness for the cops. Talk about social suicide. Besides, how would that look, for Havoc’s wife to do such a thing? I push the paperwork back and thread my fingers in my hair.

When Sara comes back in, she's holding a familiar box. She sets it on the counter beside me. I don't touch it, not right away. I don't want her to know how important that box is to me. *Old Homework and Assignments* stares back at me in looping, feminine letters.

"We kept what we needed of Penelope's things," Sara tells me, laying a hand on my shoulder. It's meant to be comforting, but my skin itches with the need to throw her off. I don't want to be comforted right now; I want my phone back. I want to see Havoc. "You're welcome to keep the rest."

"Am I free to leave?" I ask, knowing that what happened at the school won't be enough for a charge of any kind to stick to me. That was self-defense. Of course, the very fact that the GMP came to Prescott in the first place is enough to get Sara to look more closely at Havoc. But I can't be charged for defending myself against white supremacists wearing ski masks and carrying weapons with silencers.

"You can leave," Sara says carefully, but I can tell there's more to this. She isn't done with me, not by a long shot. "But I would like you to consider this offer. It's a onetime thing, Bernadette. The DA isn't going to give you this opportunity again."

"Please take me home," I insist. Sara stares at me for a moment and then nods, taking the paperwork for the deal and stacking it neatly before slipping it back into a manila folder. I grab the box of Pen's things and head for the front door.

There's an uneasiness in the air that tells me our city is on the brink of change.

What that change might be, depends on us.

Sara wants an informant to help clean up the streets?

Fuck her.

We take care of our own in Prescott.

And the GMP ... they're Havoc's problem now.

CHAPTER

THREE

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Victor Channing

My palms slam into the glass of the French doors leading into the Bordeaux—an upscale wine bar in Oak River Heights that serves escargot and pâté as bar food. It’s the most pretentious place I’ve ever fucking seen. The doors swing open with a bang, causing the hostess to jump as I scowl in her direction and she cowers against the decorative rock wall like a shrinking violet.

“Excuse me, sir, you need a jacket,” a man simpers as I storm past him, dried blood crusted under my fingernails. I swear to god, I can still taste it in my mouth. I ignore the maître d’ as I sweep past, dressed in a clean white t-shirt and jeans. The only shower I’ve had was a quick one down at the precinct; I could really use another. But, business first.

I pause next to the table where Ophelia and Trinity are seated, crossing my arms over my chest as they both turn their gazes up to mine. I don’t often see my mother surprised, but something akin to fear flickers in her dark eyes before she remembers to school her features against my presence.

“Victor, have a seat,” Ophelia tells me, sipping her wine. Trinity is a bit white in the face. Does she know yet, that her half-brother is dead? Or should I say her lover? Shit, they’re one in the same, aren’t they? *Incestuous motherfuckers.*

“I agreed to this little deal for a reason,” I say, lifting a hand and gesturing absently at Trinity Jade. She blinks up at me with eyes like sawdust. That’s the color they are to me, something dull and dusty, something useless. Scrap. Throwaway. I would never actually entertain the thought of marrying or sleeping with someone like her.

Everybody knows Prescott girls are the best in bed anyway.

A smirk catches the edge of my lips, but it doesn’t take. Today was a complete goddamn surprise to me, and I thought I’d prepared for everything. Agreeing to marry Trinity was supposed to get the Grand Murder Party off my ass. Instead, my school got shot up. Unacceptable.

“What on earth are you talking about?” Trinity asks, smoothing her hands over her lap and looking at me like she’d happily ride my dick into oblivion. I stare back at her, and I don’t bother to mask my feelings. I wait until she shivers before turning my attention back to the egg donor.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I start, a sarcastic laugh snapping out of me like the crack of a whip. Sliding a borrowed phone out of my pocket, I pull up a news site and toss it onto the table. *Low-Income School Devastated by Shooting*. Don’t ya just love that? How they had to mention how poor we are in Prescott? As if that fucking matters. “Maybe the fact that the GMP sent more than a dozen men to my fucking high school this morning.”

“We didn’t know about this,” Trinity says, glancing over at Ophelia. Based on her expression, I don’t think she knows that James Barrasso is dead yet. That, or she’s as much of a psychopath as my mother and doesn’t care. “This wasn’t part of our plan either; James was responsible. His father is going to have a talk—”

“James is dead,” I say, because I want the news to sting. I want to see this girl’s reaction. She just stares at me like I’ve spoken in another language. If Hael were here, I’d ask him to translate it into French for me. Maybe this highbrow bitch would understand that?

“Sir, I need to insist you put on a jacket ...” the maître d' says, approaching me the way you might a vicious dog, one that’s foaming at the mouth and straining against a chain. But, you know, I’m not an animal—even if Bernadette makes me feel like one. *Fuck, I need to be inside of her. That’s what I need to do, go home and bury myself in her heat.* That’ll calm me down. She’s the only person that can.

Ehh, but I’m a reasonable monster.

I take the jacket and slip it on. After all, the employees here are basically slaves to the wealthy. They’re paid a pittance that doesn’t even cover their fucking bills to wait on these people hand and foot. Why is it so much to ask, to just give people a living wage? How the fuck is this shit controversial and politically polarizing?

I sit down at the table, grab the bottle of wine by the neck—I hope it’s expensive—and chug the rest of it in one go. On the outside, I look calm. I know I do. On the inside, I’m fucking seething. One mantra repeats over and over in my mind: *rein in your temper Vic; wield it like a weapon.*

Ophelia just stares at me, her body tense, like she’s afraid I might finally do it, kill her right here and now.

But I’m also a *careful* monster.

Going to jail means no Bernadette. No protecting her. No fucking her. No holding her in my arms and kissing away her tears. She means *everything* to

me. Everything. *And I'd do anything for her ... even that.*

I won't let myself put words to whatever 'that' is, but it sits there in the back of my mind, crouched like Callum in the shadows. *Callum*. Where is Callum? Where is Hael? Aaron? Oscar? I can't get ahold of anyone.

At least I know Bernadette is safe.

For now.

But we have a serious mare's nest that needs untangling, don't we?

"James is dead?" Trinity asks, her voice hollow but her porcelain expression schooled into one of polite disinterest.

"He's dead," I reconfirm, sitting there in that awful restaurant with the stone walls and the low ceiling, live music in the corner, bottles of thousand-dollar wine on every table. That's why this place is called the Bordeaux, because they serve exclusive bottles of wine worth upwards of twenty-grand. "Killed him myself." *Lie*. But I can't let Trinity or—via whatever social grapevine they have going on—Maxwell know that it was my wife that delivered the final blow. If anyone is going to receive retribution for that, it should be me.

Being the leader fucking blows sometimes.

I tap my fingers on the surface of the table. I'm so agitated right now, it's tempting to just kill both women right here, right now. But that won't solve our problems with the GMP. Or the police. *Reasonable monster, careful monster, neat monster. Don't make any messes you can't clean up, Victor Channing.*

"Excuse me," Trinity says, standing up so suddenly that the attendant rushing over to help with her chair doesn't quite make it in time. With small, neat steps, she makes her way to the restroom, leaving me alone with Ophelia Mars.

I look over at her.

"This changes everything. You know that, right?"

She sips her wine, eyes focused ahead on all the curious, gossiping nitwits that fill the restaurant. In an ebony gown made of silk, her hair twisted into a chignon, my mother is the very picture of elegance. I look just like her, but hyper masculine instead of hyper feminine. If I had a daughter, I bet she'd be Ophelia's clone. Our DNA runs strong on that side of the family.

"Let me talk with Maxwell; this was all a huge mistake."

"I cannot undo his son being dead," I tell her, knowing that there will be no

more talks of peace between the Grand Murder Party and Havoc. They're going to come at us with everything they have and then some.

I'm not sure we can handle that.

Not head-to-head anyway.

We do best creeping in shadows.

"Let me talk to him," Ophelia insists, turning to look at me. Even now, I can see the wheel in her head turning as she plots. The way she looks at me, I can tell she imagines that's what I'm doing, too, plotting against her. Of course, she thinks like that because she's always scheming. People who scheme the way she does always suspect everyone else of doing the same.

In this case, at least, she's right.

I shake my head, a sardonic laugh slipping from my throat.

"Talk to him about *what*?" I ask, tilting my head to one side as I study her, like a wolf who cannot quite understand why his prey is still running when it's quite clear she'll be on her side, bleeding hot in the snow, sometime soon.

"Just give me time, Victor," she snaps back at me, fingers tightening ever so slightly on her wineglass. Ah, there it is, that perfect porcelain mask of hers cracking right down the middle. This is as bad for her as it is for me, and she knows it. If I die, my entire inheritance goes to charity—as per Grandma Ruby's wishes.

And wouldn't that just be a shame?

"I'm preparing my people," I tell her, knowing that whatever information I give her now is going straight to Maxwell Barrasso. "We'll wait for an official apology from Maxwell, but only until Monday. You have a week, Ophelia." I pause and lean forward, looking her dead in the face. I want her to know how serious I am about this. "One week."

I stand up, taking the jacket with me.

The restaurant can add it to Trinity's tab.

Lord knows Ophelia can't afford it.

CHAPTER

FOUR

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Bernadette Blackbird

Sara Young pulls into the driveway of Aaron's place. I'm heartbroken to see all the windows dark. The Bronco and the Firebird are missing. Shit, I don't even see Vic's Harley. Across the street, two uniformed officers sit in a quiet cruiser, watching the place.

I can't decide if it's for our protection ... or to catch us in a lie.

"Can I please have my phone back?" I ask, turning to look at her. I don't know what the rules are for cops and phones and searches and all that. I do know that Sara had a search warrant, and that her team seemed to have no trouble cracking my passcode.

She shuts the ignition off, leaving the car to tick and cool around us.

"Not at this time, no," she tells me, and I sigh. It's such a heavy sound, you'd think the world were collapsing around me. "Do you want to tell me what *mare's nest* means?"

My mouth twitches.

"A *place, condition, or situation of great disorder or confusion*," I say, quoting Merriam-Webster for the win. I shift my gaze away from the dash and over to Sara's petite face. She's so ... cute. And pixie-like. Pretty much the opposite of me. When I look up and into the mirror on the back of the sun visor, I can see my pouty mouth, the dramatic shape of my eyes. Without my usual makeup, I look too young. The image disturbs me, so I flip the visor up and away. "Why do you ask?"

"Do we have to keep playing these games?" Sara asks me, losing a bit of her practiced patience. "You sent a text with the words *mare's nest* just about the time the shooting started. Why? What does it mean? Is it a code word?"

"I have the right to remain silent, don't I?" I ask, looking back at her. "I mean, I'm not under arrest right now. Really, I didn't do anything wrong. Every man I killed today had it coming. You don't come into *my* school and start guerrilla warfare with my crew."

Sara says nothing as I open the door and climb out. It occurs to me that if Prescott High—a very public place that was actively being watched by cops—is a target for the GMP then Aaron's house is no longer safe.

We're going to have to move.

Shit.

“Would you mind walking me in?” I ask, raising a brow as I lean down and stare at her across the interior of the maroon-colored Subaru she’s driving. No way in hell this is her real car. It’s gotta be a rental. “I’d rather not get ganked by a member of the GMP.”

I shut the door before she can respond, but I’m not surprised when she follows me. As I glance over my shoulder, I see Detective Constantine in a car just down the block. He’s watching us which is unsurprising.

Everything I do from now on is going to be carefully observed and recorded.

I move up the walk and unlock the front door, bringing Sara with me. I’m sure if she doesn’t have a search warrant for this place yet, she’ll get one soon enough. Her eyes are brimming with curiosity as the door swings open, and I turn on the lamp near the sofa.

“Not quite the gangbang shithole you expected, huh?” I ask, turning around and watching as she takes in the simple living room, the dining table with a spray of fresh flowers in the vase, the Christmas tree in the corner we have yet to take down.

“It’s a nice house,” Sara says, waiting near the front door until Detective Constantine and both uniformed officers join her. They begin a sweep of the house, starting with the downstairs. The weed is in a locked cabinet in the converted garage area, and the whole back corner of the house reeks of it. But it is technically legal in Oregon, even if it’s still illegal federally. *What a joke, making a medicinal plant a schedule one narcotic.* But I’m too stressed out about my boys to go on one of my usual political rants.

I go for the stairs next, ignoring Sara when she calls out for me to wait.

When I get halfway up, I can hear it: the shower’s running.

I sprint up the last few steps as fast as I can, taking advantage of the broken lock on the door to fling it open. It smashes into the wall and I see Victor Channing under a stream of hot water, one hand on the wall, his eyes closed. He glances up at me, his dark gaze slicing through me like a knife. I want to bleed for him. I want to belong to him. More than anything, I want to be his queen.

“Bernadette,” he breathes, looking past me to where Sara is now standing. I glance back at her and see her face flush as she curses and turns away. Heh. Guess even hardened FBI agents are red-blooded women underneath it all. Vic might be eighteen, but he’s a man in every way that matters.

“Would you mind putting some clothes on?” Sara asks after she turns her back on us. What trust she has, to turn her back on the queen and king of Havoc.

“I’d rather not, thanks,” Vic says, giving me a smirking half-smile. That’s a good sign, right? If he’s smiling like that? The other boys must be okay. They just have to be, right? Because my story is incomplete without them. Then again, I know better than anyone that real life makes zero narrative sense.

Not everything can be tied up in a beautiful bow.

Sometimes bad things happen. Sometimes *really* bad things happen.

“Are you the only one here?” Sara asks as Vic grudgingly pulls the shower curtain closed.

“Just me,” he says which reignites some of that awful sinking feeling inside of me. It’s like ... all those butterflies that broke from their cocoons and took off in flight because of the boys, they’re dying. Fragile wings are broken. The beautiful dust of their scales flaking off and stolen away by the wind.

“Do you know the whereabouts of Callum Park?”

Sara’s next question gives me pause.

“What do you mean by that?” I ask, alarm pitching my voice an octave higher than it should be. *My dark avenger, my broken fairy-tale prince with a crown made of bones. Why the fuck is she asking about him specifically?*

“He was at school today, was he not?” Sara asks, turning back around to look at me. “He’s the only one of your ... crew, is it? Anyway, he’s the only one we haven’t been able to locate.”

I just stare back at her.

“Meaning you have the rest of my family in custody?” Vic asks, pushing the curtain back and grabbing the towel off the rack. He throws it around his hips and then pauses behind me, resting his forearm on the doorjamb above my head. I can feel him in the same way one might feel an inferno. There’s scalding heat at my back, threatening to burn but oh so pleasant on a cold winter night. My throat gets tight, my mouth goes dry, and I can’t stop the flood of desperate longing that takes over my core.

“Meaning we have the rest of your boys accounted for,” Sara says carefully, and my heart sinks. Her words are no reassurance at all. *Accounted for* could easily mean *dead*. I choke a little on the idea. “I’m guessing you

don't know where Callum is either?" I will never forget the expression on that woman's face. She looks ... sad. Not in the same way that I'd be if Callum were gone—that, that would be like a black hole opening up inside of me, a tear so dramatic and violent that entire galaxies could be spirited away. She looks like someone who hates to deliver bad news but is exceedingly good at it.

The FBI doesn't know where Cal is.

"Can you please leave?" I ask. "I'd like to be alone with my husband."

"Husband ..." Sara begins, exhaling sharply. There's something in the way she's looking at me that tells me she knows about the annulment. I don't care. It's not official by any means. We've only filled out the paperwork to start the process; there's still a decree of annulment. There's still a court date.

I'm not going through with any of it.

Victor wanted to keep me safe. I understand that. Shit, I'd have done the same thing for him.

Circumstances have changed.

That, and I feel like I've finally grown a pair of ovaries.

"I'll be in touch," Sara says finally, heading down the stairs as I turn away. Victor and I ignore her, too intent on one another to pay much attention. My heart thunders in my chest and my nostrils flare with Vic's scent. His breath hitches, as if he can sense that I'm scenting him. Preparing myself. He shifts that big body of his, steam rising from his inked flesh.

I glance briefly toward the stairs as Sara pauses in the living room to speak with Constantine. Then, finally, they both leave. The sound of the front door closing is as ominous as the careful, shuttered clasp of a casket lid ending the legacy of a life.

I turn back to Vic.

Our eyes meet.

My hands find his towel.

The fabric falls to the floor as he lifts me up and parks me on the bathroom counter. His lips are a hot slash of menace, as they always are, but there's something softer underneath, something that speaks to me as both a primal, sexual being and a spiritual entity. I feel him on every level. He's a beautiful masculine specimen, the perfect complement to my femininity. He's also my soul mate in every way that matters.

Victor growls as he claws at my borrowed sweatpants, wrenching the seam

down the center of the crotch, like he can't even be bothered to take them off. I'm not wearing panties—mine were covered in blood and thanks but no thanks on wearing borrowed underwear from police girl.

“Fuck, you taste like blood,” Vic says, but not like it's a bad thing. His mouth moves from my lips to my neck, so he can bite down at the same time that he thrusts, owning me, claiming me, just the way I need in this moment. We need to reconnect, readjust, reevaluate. Connecting our bodies this way brings up a firestorm that burns away the confusion and the fear, the frustration and the worry.

We will find Callum.

We will win this city.

We will not let them win.

My arms twine around Victor's neck as he drives into me, hands cupping my ass, hips driving forward until he hits the end of me, and I cry out. He smells like that fancy peach soap from France that I jacked out of the glitzy Oak Park boutique, and his skin is vibrant and hot from the spray of the shower. I dig my nails into his muscles, absorbing his strength through my fingertips, stealing his essence like a dark witch with a pointed hat, a cottage in the woods, and nails tipped with poison.

Vic comes when I tell him to, whispering horrible things in his ear that cause him to shudder and grip me like he's falling. This time, it's *my* turn to catch him. And I do. And I'm okay with that.

I do not see Kali's ghost.

I don't think I ever will again.

No, I *know* that I won't.

Because I'm done letting other people get in my head. I'm done consenting to the act of feeling inferior.

Fuck all of that.

I am *queen* of Havoc, and we are just getting started.

“Do you think the GMP took Cal with them when they left?” I ask Victor, sitting at a stool in the kitchen in the dark and waiting for the other boys to come back. It's just after six in the evening, and they're still not here.

Our crew—what's left of it anyway—is crawling the city, sticking to

shadows but keeping an eye on the comings and goings of the cops *and* the GMP.

Vic puts his palms on the counter and looks at me across the surface of it. Every once in a while, there's a knock at one of the doors and a crew member waiting. Victor speaks to them in low, hushed tones, and then returns back to the counter.

So far, no further activity from the GMP.

They'd have to be stupid to come here right now, with all of those fucking cops outside. Not that a gang like the GMP cares about the police, but with the VGTF involved, that means FBI. That means media coverage.

In a day and age where corruption runs so rampant that it taints every aspect of daily life, *attention* is the true nightmare of the underground. Shine a light on something and see the people rise.

I take a bite of a burnt pancake, frowning at the taste of ash on my tongue. Victor is not nearly as good in the kitchen as Hael or Aaron. Shit, he's almost as bad as I am.

"Tastes like shit, huh?" he asks, sighing as he flicks the stack of black pancakes with an inked finger. Clearly, he's avoiding answering my question. Vic grabs the pack of cigarettes from the counter and lights one up, holding it between his lips as he watches me with a guarded look in his dark eyes. It's like, as open as we were with each other upstairs, we've both buttoned-down and closed ourselves off.

This, this is a waiting game.

We need to see if the other boys come back from the station, and then we need to find Callum—before the feds do. Or the GMP. That is, if they don't have him already.

"If the GMP took Callum," I begin, watching as Vic pulls his borrowed phone close (this one's from a member of our crew) and taps an app for a food delivery service. It reminds me of the night we spent together after he gave me a much-needed pep talk in that infamous closet of his. We're so similar, me and Vic. I kept pretending like I don't understand him and his motivations, but in reality, it's just because I was too stubborn—or too afraid—to understand myself. "Then we'd know, right? I mean, they'd try to contact us somehow to hold that over our heads?"

Vic gives me a long, steady look that scares the shit out of me. And the reason it does that is because if I were to give somebody else that look, I'd be

saying one thing and one thing only: *I'm sorry.*

I grit my teeth.

“It’s what *you* suggested before, when Aaron—”

“It’s what I thought happened to Aaron when Ophelia was just a conniving bitch with the Charter Crew as her pets. But the GMP ...” Victor trails off and closes his eyes for a moment, swiping his hand over his face.

I just sit there and stare at him, and then I grab a cigarette from the same pack and gesture at him for a light. He flicks the flame on the lighter as he stares back at me, the orange glow highlighting the masculine lines of his face. Everything about Victor Channing screams primal, male, terrifying.

I keep my eyes on his until the cherry of my cigarette crackles with heat.

“I ordered pizza,” Vic tells me, and I can feel his eyes on me even when I look away.

We both pause at the sound of a key in a lock and exchange looks. If someone is here, and none of our crew bothered to inform us that someone was on the way ...

That can mean only one thing: *Havoc.*

But which letter? Which motherfucking letter?

I stand up from the stool, heart pumping so furiously that if I were to nick my carotid the way we did Danny’s ... this entire room would be bathed in blood.

The front door opens, and Oscar slips in, letting it swing shut behind him. It takes me a second to recognize that it’s him since he’s no longer wearing his suit. I imagine that, like with me and Vic, the cops took his clothes.

He reaches back and flicks the deadbolt. And then, when he turns his gray eyes over to me, I swear that his attention cuts through the shadows like a ghost on a haunt. Delving into me. Owning me. Possessing me.

My breath catches, and I have to lean back and curl my fingers around the edge of the countertop, just to stay standing upright.

“Shit, they give you the nth degree, too?” Vic asks, and Oscar turns his head very slowly to look at our boss. My husband. His longtime friend. So many fucking things. My eyes rake over Oscar’s body, taking in the long, lean lines of him, the myriad tattoos showing on his exposed arms, above the scooped neck of the white wifebeater he’s wearing. The sweats he’s got on—they look like they might be part of a Prescott gym uniform—sagging so low that I can see a band of ink between his lower belly and his waistband.

“They know a lot of things,” Oscar says, turning back to me and moving very, very slowly down the length of the living room toward the kitchen. As he goes, he grabs a half-empty pack of cigarettes and a light from the top of a shelf, flicking the wheel and firing up the end of one. By the time he gets to me, he’s pulling in a long drag and then exhaling pretty white smoke into the darkness surrounding me.

He taints it, too, Oscar does. He taints it fuckin’ filthy, and I love everything about that, about the way he poisons the air, the way his stare is venom and his heart ice, his trauma so deep it could make canyons in his soul. That’s what I like, all of it.

“But not enough to keep me,” Oscar finishes finally, tossing the pack of smokes onto the counter and then removing the cigarette from his sharp and dangerous mouth with two fingers. He stares down at me, and I feel like I can hear it, the pounding of his heart. His signature cinnamon smell grabs me by the throat, pun intended. “We have to make some moves—and quick.”

“Do you know where Callum is?” I ask, and Oscar goes very still, like a vampire who’s forgotten what it feels like to breathe. That’s a scary thing to witness, watching someone turn into a statue of ink and blood and bullshit.

“No,” Oscar breathes darkly, and Vic sighs, reaching out to take the smoke from Oscar’s fingers. As if this is one of Callum’s choreographed dances, Oscar’s hands find their way to my hips. In an instant, his breath is stirring my hair and my eyes are closing of their own accord. “The last I saw of him, he was outside the school, chasing someone.”

“Shit,” I grind out, because I don’t like the sound of that. I don’t like it at fucking all. “Chasing who?”

Oscar gives a slow, simple shake of his head, and I grit my teeth in anger. Not at him. At myself. At Prescott. At the world in general. Callum Park should be at, like, fucking Juilliard or something, not chasing down Nazis during a school shooting.

See if the other boys come home, Bernie. Then call Ophelia. Make her put you in touch with Maxwell. If he has Callum, or he knows what happened to him, he’ll tell you. He’ll do that because he’s a monster, and monsters always recognize other monsters.

And their weaknesses.

The Havoc Boys are my strength, but they’re also my weakness. My life force and my demise. My rise and fall. *Fuck.*

“I was worried about you,” Oscar says, and a quip hops right to my naked lips, the ones that feel foreign because they’re not covered in brightly tinted wax, brilliant jewel tones of stolen color that represent so many different things. It’s part of my armor, that lipstick, that color, those opinions. Because if I can tell you what lipstick I’m wearing and why, then I don’t have to answer all those other pesky questions that a person can pose: *who are you? what do you do? where are you going in life and why?*

“I was worried about you, too,” I say, my eyelashes fluttering as Oscar takes my face in inked fingers and then swiftly drops his mouth to my lips, tasting like mint and cucumber water. I bet they gave him that to loosen him up, to make him feel less like a prisoner and more like a friend. But people like us are not their friends. And they’d best remember that.

Oscar draws back from me slightly, looking me right in the face from a distance that’s both physically and emotionally close. Right now, in this moment, I know he can see every single part of me—bad stuff as well as good.

“We need to call Ophelia,” Oscar says, turning his head away sharply, like the level of intimacy between us in that kitchen is too much for him. He keeps touching me, and I remember my question from the ski lodge: *do you want me to keep touching you?*

He confirmed it.

Look, I’ll give credit where credit is due: he was marginally better after that night. Of course, that was only two nights ago. Trauma does, of course, accelerate things. Emotion. Trust. Those tight bonds that hold you together when the whole world is trying so desperately to tear you apart.

His hold on me is endless and eternal; it isn’t unbreakable because the possibility of being broken was never even an option. It just is. A fact. As sure as the moon rises.

I swipe a hand over my face to clear the poetry. Jesus, give me a traumatic moment, my fingers buried in some sister-fucker’s eye sockets, and endless amounts of blood, and I start thinking my everyday thoughts in purple prose. What I was trying to say is: I’m glad that Oscar’s back. Because I love him. And I know that, in his own special secret way, he loves me, too.

“I visited Ophelia,” Vic says, surprising me. He hadn’t mentioned that until now. To be fair, we haven’t been here for all that long. Two or three hours, tops. Most of it spent speaking with our crew via text or phone—oh, and that

quickie fuck in the bathroom. “She was with Trinity, at a restaurant in one of those fucking tree neighborhoods.”

I smile at that, but it’s a sad smile. It’ll remain that way until I see the other boys. Callum, in particular. How is it that we just got Aaron back and now Callum is missing? That doesn’t seem fair, does it? In books and movies and shit, isn’t it always the girl who gets kidnapped and spirited away? Patriarchal bullshit, to be sure, but I’d trade my life for any one of these boys in an instant.

Bet they’d be pissed if they knew that. Probably spank me some more, too.

I better tell them, just as soon as we’re all together again.

“Well?” Oscar asks, an edge of annoyance making the single word feel sharp, like broken glass. “What did they have to say about the ... incident?”

Prescott High Massacre.

That was the title of the article I read, written by a reporter by the name of Emma Jean. Fakest fucking name I’ve ever heard in my life, but shit, maybe she’s on the run from someone or something? Who the fuck knows? The reason that I recognize her name is that she was infamous for being able to get Scarlett Force, the locally famous female racer with the three boyfriends, to give exclusive interviews.

I shake my head, reaching up to rub at my temple with two fingers. I got the ever-living shit kicked out of me today and the bruises to prove it. My body is mottled and purple, like a corpse, just after the blood settles and discolors the skin. *Shiver.* Shit, I’m even creeping myself out now. Cal would be proud.

My throat tightens as I cock a brow at Vic.

He stares back at me, eyes like crows, a mouth of lush heat, muscles that get every feminine part of me to purr and rub like a cat in heat. I blink a few times and he sighs.

“Those persnickety bitches are acting like they didn’t know about the hit,” Victor tells Oscar, looking at him instead of me. Oscar remains right where he is, pressed up against me, fingers splayed on my hip and against my right cheek. It’s like ... we’re frozen in that wardrobe all over again, like he’s stuck here, glued to me against his will. I know we’re having a moment; I’d appreciate it more under different circumstances. “According to them, James organized this on his own. Trinity looked like she might shit herself when I told her that her brother—or is it fuckbuddy?—was dead.” Vic steps forward

and snags another cigarette. Chain-smoking, like he always does when he's nervous.

"James Barrasso, dead on arrival," Oscar purrs out, and then he looks back at me like he's having trouble catching his breath, too. Then, and I swear to god this wasn't planned, I feel a warm trickle against my thigh and glance down to see a bit of red in the darkness, sneaking out from beneath Callum's shorts that I borrowed. I have a habit of doing that, borrowing my men's clothes.

Doesn't it feel nice, to cover yourself in their scent? It's primal, I guess, and I can be a primal bitch.

"What great timing," I choke out as Oscar closes his eyes and releases me. "And yes, James Barrasso is dead; Maxwell is never going to let this go, not even if it was his crew's fault to begin with."

The blood hits the floor in a bright red splotch, visible even inside the darkened kitchen. Twilight cuts through the sliding glass door, its silver brilliance enough to cut through the frigid cold of a January evening.

"You can wash up," Oscar tells me, opening his eyes to stare at me. "I promise that I won't fuck you and leave this time." He just keeps looking at me, and I turn away, ignoring Vic's lingering stare as I head into the upstairs bathroom with a curse.

Of course I'd get my period today, of all days. As irregular as usual, as unpredictable. *Is this a sign of how my powers work, huh? Like, they're tied to the moon and blood and the irresistible power of being female?*

I slam my hands on the countertop and stare at myself in the mirror for a moment.

Take control, Bernadette. Period blood is a sign of magic.

I stare at myself, at eyes the color of an evergreen forest, stuck forever in a shade of emerald. My skin is pale, like the flesh of a ghost who's never met the sun. My cheeks are too pink, my stomach twisted up with cramps. *Fuck, that hurts.* I feel like ... well, like I was kicked in the belly. And I was. Just a few hours ago.

With a groan, I flick the water on and splash my already clean face, trying to wash away the violent feeling of panic. "*The last I saw of him, he was outside the school, chasing someone.*" Chasing who? Why? Where?

If he's anywhere near the school, Sara and her squadron of feds will ferret him out.

But I doubt it.

Because if Callum were alive and well, he'd have contacted us by now. That means that, wherever he is, he needs our help.

I clean myself up, put a disposable cup in—the kind you can keep in while you fuck—and then head back into the hallway. I pause at the sound of the front door and find myself poised at the top of the steps, waiting. Breathless. *Come on, come on.*

“Honey, I’m home,” Hael says, stepping inside and kicking the door closed behind him. He leans his shoulder against the coat closet door and swipes a hand down his face as I take the stairs two at a time and find myself breathing hard in front of him.

My fingers itch to touch him, but I wait, taking in his tousled red hair, oversized hoodie, and loose sweats. He, too, has changed from the clothes he wore to school this morning.

Hael smiles down at me, but it’s a tired smile for sure. We could all use some fucking sleep. Shit, we *deserve* to count sheep, smoke a little pot, and crash hard. But that isn’t happening until every member of our family is safe and accounted for.

“Good timing on those explosives,” I whisper, and Hael’s smile gets a little prettier, a little more real.

“We keep minor explosives in all our crew’s cars, didn’t you know? Have them park here and there—just in case.” He leans down and cups the side of my face, very gently rubbing the side of his stubbled cheek up against the smooth surface of my own. “You’re very welcome by the way.”

Hael holds the sweet chastity of that moment in a proverbial hand until I close my eyes and exhale sharply, releasing some of that frenetic energy inside of me. Only then does he turn and slide his hot mouth over mine, banding an arm around my waist and pulling me up against him so hard and so fast that my head spins.

My fingers dig into his bloodred hair as his tongue dives into my mouth, using sex the way he always has, as a weapon, as a shield, as a coping mechanism. I don’t mind. The only woman he’s going to be using it on from now on is yours truly. My own tongue challenges his, stealing the hot heat of his mouth and tasting the faintest sweetness of cherry cola.

I groan in pain as another horrible cramp takes over and Hael pulls back just enough to look at me. “Sorry, started my period just now,” I murmur as

he stands up straight and puts a hand on the top of my head. He leaves his other arm around my waist, smelling like coconuts and hope.

“Don’t apologize for being a woman, ‘kay?” He glances over at Vic as he comes out of the kitchen, pausing to stand beside Oscar. The simple movement is also a blatant command: *tell me everything. Now.* “Aaron should be right behind me. He was with *Constantine* last I asked.”

Hael rolls his eyes and then releases me, the loss of his warmth a palpable thing that makes me feel twitchy. So I put my arms around his waist and press my cheek against the hardness of his chest. There’s no resistance in him when he shudders, exhales, and then strokes his fingers through my hair.

“Aaron,” I whisper, and the word sounds like a promise, an entire lifetime of connection and need in two syllables. *Aaron is okay. He’s safe.* I already know what it feels like to lose him. Once, I lost him to Havoc. Then, I very nearly lost him to Kali.

I can’t survive that again.

No, it’s Havoc or bust at this point. Nobody ever said our relationships were healthy or normal, but there’s something deliciously decadent about obsession. Even when you know you shouldn’t want it, even when you know it’s wrong. That’s part of the fun, taking a sip of a poison that, one day, could very well kill you.

Then again, we all die eventually. I’d rather go down engulfed in black flame, my head filled with the dizzying venom of true love, and my body sated and stroked by five glorious men with inked bodies and dark hearts that beat only for me.

“Good,” Vic says finally, pausing as his phone buzzes. He takes it from his pocket and checks the screen. “Pizzas are here.”

“Oh, thank god,” Hael groans, still holding me against him. If I close my eyes, I can hear his heart thundering. On the outside, he’s the same cool, cocky man-whore he always was. On the inside, he’s nervous. As he should be. Today was nothing short of a fucked-up clusterfuck of epic fucking proportions with an extra dose of fuckity fuck-fuck-fuck for good measure. “I’m starving.” He looks down at me and then back over at Vic and Oscar. “Where’s Cal?”

I pull away from Hael because with one simple question, it’s like he’s thrown a bucket of ice water over me. Cursing under my breath, I grab the loaded pistol sitting on the decorative side table nearby, keeping it hidden as I

check the peephole and then open the door.

Because there are cops outside, I make sure to hold it behind my back as I search the neighborhood for threats. Fortunately, all I find is a stack of pizza boxes, a plastic bag filled with two-liters of soda, and the delivery guy halfway down the driveway as he heads back to his car. That coronavirus thing that happened all those years ago, it spurred some interesting changes. No-contact delivery being one adaptation that I'm glad the world has decided to stick with.

I take the stack and bring it inside, setting it down on the table. It all feels unbelievably ... *normal*. Like, what the hell just happened today?

"Sara Young doesn't seem to know where Callum is either," is how Vic eventually replies, as careful with his words as he always is. "So, he isn't lying dead in the morgue with James Barrasso. And he isn't down at the station answering a bunch of stupid-ass questions. He also hasn't called the house." Vic gestures absently at the home phone sitting nearby, the one that Havoc keeps around in case of emergency. Like, say, if the feds were to take all our goddamn phones. "Our crew is combing the streets, but there's no sign of him."

"I'm working on it now," Oscar says, his iPad parked his lap. I'm not surprised that he still has it. We're very careful with what we do and say on our phones, but Oscar is not careful with that damn iPad. It's the hub of everything we do. Also, I'm pretty sure he's in love with it. A lesser woman would be jealous. "Tracking his phone, that is."

Hael brings over the bag with the sodas in it and sets it beside the mountain of pizza boxes. One thing about dating five teenage guys is that they eat and eat and fucking eat. Like, it's a constant stream of them putting shit in their fucking mouths. That is, except for Oscar. I rarely see him eat anything at all.

And it's always Cal who eats the most. Cal who always has a snack. Cal who purposely doesn't eat at school, his lunch tray laden with Pepsi cans and cigarettes so that everyone who attends Prescott will think he's a monster that feasts only on blood.

"How long will that take?" I ask, clutching my belly as I sink down into a chair at the table. My cramps this time are kicking my fucking ass—almost as bad as the GMP did outside the school. Everything hurts; I could seriously use a hot tub or at the very least, a warm bath.

Oscar lifts his silver eyes to mine, like two full moons in the damaged face

of a broken aristocrat.

“About two seconds,” he says, turning the iPad around so I can see the screen. “His phone is about three blocks from the school.”

I flip open the top box, snatch a slice of cheese pizza and fold it into my mouth.

“Let’s go,” I murmur around the slice, shoving up from the chair and heading straight for the pink leather Havoc jacket hanging near the front door. I’m in no shape to go anywhere, bruised up and bleeding between the thighs, but I’d crawl over a sea of broken glass to reach Cal. Cramps? Feds? White supremacist gangs? That shit is *nothing*.

“They’ll follow us over there,” Vic warns, gesturing with his chin toward the front of the house. “Those cops.”

“Better than the GMP,” I say, clenching my teeth. Who knows how many officers the GMP has in their pocket? And it’s no surprise to me that Neil was one of them. Bet ya Pamela knew all about it, too. “Let’s go find our boy.”

I pause near the front door as my cup quite literally runneth over and my new pj pants turn red with blood at the crotch. *Cocksucking motherfucker*. Irregular, heavy periods complete with cramps. Just what I need today. Tonight? I’m not even really sure what time is it anymore.

“Take care of that,” Vic tells me with a nod. “And we’ll gear up. I’ll let the crew know to redirect Aaron our way when he gets out.”

He lights up another cigarette as I head back up the stairs, heart racing.

What we’re all thinking, but what nobody is saying, is that it’s weird for Cal’s phone to be so close to the school yet there to be no sign of him.

I killed James Barrasso today.

If the GMP has Cal, there is no way in hell that they’re going to let him go.

If they have him ... then he’s already dead.

CHAPTER

FIVE

The screen of Cal's phone is cracked and covered in blood. As soon as I pick it up and see the last text message that he sent—*mare's nest*—I almost lose my shit.

"Bernadette," Victor says softly, prying the thing from my shaking hand. "Rein in that temper. Use it like a weapon. There is nobody here for you to use it on, so store that shit and save it for later."

He looks at the phone for a minute, face grim, and then passes it over to Oscar.

"Mare's nest?" Hael asks, reading over Oscar's shoulder. "No fucking way." There's something strained in his voice that echoes the sick, hollow feeling inside of me. That's our word, that's our Havoc cry for help. And none of us got the message because we were either too busy fighting off active shooters or the feds had already taken our phones.

The thought really does fill me with a violent, irrational sort of rage.

Swallowing hard, I choke it down and try to ignore the worsening cramps. It's bad. So bad that I can already feel my cup leaking again, blood soaking into the heavy overnight pad I put on for extra protection. Not good.

"There was clearly a fight here," Oscar says, letting Hael take the phone from his hand. "Let's see if we can't keep following the scent."

Finding Cal's phone was easy, especially with a trail of blood that led right from the front door to the fourth floor. There are bodies in here, too. And

only three blocks away from an investigation. Red and blue lights paint the exterior of Prescott High in horrid color, and there's yellow police tape everywhere.

To get over here without an escort, we had to drop our cars at a local diner, slip inside, and then crawl out the bathroom window. I'm sure our copper friends know we're gone already, but what can they do?

"He clearly fought his way out," I say, pausing beside a dead man with a ruined throat. There's a bloodied board nearby, jagged splinters of wood at one end. Kneeling down beside the body, I mimic what Cal did at the Snow Day after-party, pushing up the man's shirt until I find that slash of red that makes up his gang tattoo.

I've never really had the time or opportunity to study it before, but now that I'm looking at it, the beam of a flashlight falling across the dead man's waxy skin, I see that it's the silhouette of a clown face. Bowler hat tilted to one side, round nose, a single X for the left eye, and its mouth a twisted rictus.

Well, now, that explains where the Charter Crew got their mask idea from.

I stand up and shake out my hands, following Hael outside to the sidewalk. There's a bit of blood immediately in front of the door, but none leading in either direction.

If Cal really did get out of here on his own two feet, he was careful to cover his tracks.

"Let's search every building in a five-block radius," Vic grunts out, glancing in the direction of the high school. "If he's here, we'll find him."

With my stomach clenching violently, and my head spinning from blood loss—yeah, you really can get dizzy and anemic from a heavy period—I start with the apartment complex at the end of the block. We stick together, just in case. It's much more likely that a fed will stumble on us here than a member of the GMP, but you can't be too careful.

I never thought they'd attack our school the way they did, so public, so blatant.

The GMP is not afraid. Not of the authorities, and not of us.

We sweep the apartment building twice before doing another walkthrough of the one beside it, where we found Cal's phone.

"Six dead crew members," Vic murmurs unhappily, his mouth turned down in a dark frown. "Prescott royalty." He bends down and closes the eyes

of a dead boy that I feel I recognize from last year's graduating class. For a moment, Victor stays right where he is, and even though he says nothing, does nothing, I can read his every emotion in the tense set of his shoulders.

He feels like he failed somehow.

And he's *furious* about it.

Maxwell Barrasso is going to *bleed*.

I turn away, leaving Vic to have his moment. I do that because I understand how he works. And I understand him because I'm exactly the same. Deep down, we really are just two halves of the same person.

"Let's keep going," I suggest, leading the boys outside and down the street. We check several abandoned lots, scouting outbuildings and piles of debris, rusted cars on cinder blocks, dumpsters, anywhere that Callum could've crawled into in order to hide.

It's not until we come on a foreclosed home with a sagging front porch and a roof covered in moss that I spot a broken basement window. It could be something, more than likely it's nothing. We've seen dozens of broken windows already, most of them destroyed months or even years prior.

My heartrate picks up as I duck down and peer inside.

A pool of congealed blood sits in the middle of the floor, the only color in an otherwise gray and empty space.

"Over here!" I shout, my voice cracking as I climb in and stumble briefly, putting my hand on the wall and closing my eyes against a wave of dizziness. This is easily the worst period I've ever had in my fucking life. The universe really is throwing everything she's got at me, isn't she?

When I hear Hael climbing in behind me, I open my eyes and straighten up. The boys are going through that overprotective stage in our relationship. If they see how much I'm struggling, they'll send me home. The thing is, I'm going through the queen stage of my own relationship with myself. I won't be sent home or told what to do, not today.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Hael murmurs, dropping into a crouch and touching two fingers through the blood. Just the sight of it makes me sick. "This is cold, but it's still wet." He points out the dried edges around the pool. "Half a day in and it turns black, crusts over." Hael stands back up and meets my gaze across the ruby red stain, brown eyes dark with concern. "This can't be more than ... mm, six hours old?"

Vic hops in the window next with Oscar following, iPad clutched under his

arm as he drops down into a dignified crouch and rises up like a demon from a summoning circle. I turn back to the blood as Victor steps up beside it, analyzing it with crow-black eyes and nodding once.

“I bet this was Cal,” he says, pointing at the dried edges. “He came here not long after the shooting and he stayed until recently.” Victor looks up again, gaze sweeping the basement. “But he isn’t here now ...”

“Let’s check the house,” I say, and I swear, it takes a supreme physical effort to pull my attention away from the blood so I can locate the steps to the first floor. Deep down in my heart, I want to cry. That little girl who sat sobbing over her dead daddy, the one that Callum reached out a hand for and invited to dance, she weeps for me. The rest of me remains a dark monarch.

I make my way carefully up the steps, avoiding rot and pest damage, and shoving my shoulder into the door. It doesn’t budge. When I step back and look at it, I can see that there’s no blood on it. Not on the stairs either.

“If Cal was here, he didn’t leave this way,” I say, turning back and finding all three boys at the bottom of the steps. My teeth grind in frustration, but I manage to keep it together, sweeping the basement with them as we look for clues.

So far as I can tell, there are none.

“He doesn’t want anyone to know where he’s going,” Victor says, exhaling sharply and putting his hands on his hips. “That’s a good sign. Despite ... this.” He gestures at the blood again. “He still has his head.”

“Or he was taken by the GMP,” Hael inserts, and I flick my gaze to him. He holds up his palms in an apologetic gesture. “But likely not. I mean, *they* wouldn’t have tried to hide the fact that they were here, right? And I don’t see much disturbance in the debris.” He points down at the floor where our footsteps have kicked up years of dust and leaves and pine needles.

“He could be on his way back to the house,” I suggest as Oscar pulls up a map on his iPad and turns the screen so that we can all see it.

“Here are our closest rendezvous points. Let’s check these first.” He flips the cover closed and then pauses for a brief moment, his eyes on mine. I know that he and Cal have a bromance sort of thing going on. He does his best to hide it most days, but it’s there now, reflected back in a tentative sort of tenderness that he shares with me in a single sweeping glance.

As soon as he looks away, back toward Vic, it’s gone.

“Agreed,” Victor says, and then his eyes stray over to mine, and I know he

can sense that I'm not feeling so good right now. Luckily for him, he says nothing, and I make sure that when I crawl out of the broken window, that I show no weakness.

But something is wrong. I can fucking *feel* it. I just don't know what, exactly, that is yet.

Whatever it is though, it can wait until I find my man.

Havoc puts me first. I put them first.

Blood in, blood out.

It's early morning by the time we get home—we've wasted an entire day on *nothing*. Cal is not at any of the rendezvous points and none of our crew has seen him. I slam the front door into the wall as I walk in, finding Aaron taking a cold slice of pizza from one of the boxes.

He's got dark circles under his eyes, and he looks fucking exhausted.

My heart flutters in that fairy-tale way it does when I see my childhood sweetheart safe and sound. He encapsulates my dreams of something better in the way he smiles at me; he holds the very last shred of my innocence in the warmth of his arms around me.

"You're back," I whisper, sauntering forward and acting like I don't have blood all down my thighs. I've stopped in four bathrooms to empty my cup and put new pads in. Still, I bleed.

"Just got here," he says, setting the pizza aside and then holding his arms out for me. Without hesitation, I step into them, letting his sandalwood and rose scent wash away some of the agonizing frustration I feel. I haven't even really had time to process that we survived a school shooting. Or that I killed the son of a notorious gangster. All I've been able to do is focus on Callum, the way I did on Aaron when he was missing. "One of the boys told me about Cal."

Aaron pauses there and waits, but when nobody says anything, a deep frown appears on his face.

"What took so fucking long?" Vic asks, moving up behind me and stealing Aaron's pizza slice. We're all starving; we have to take a break to eat. Really, I could use a shower and a nap, too, but I'm not sure I'll be able to relax enough to do any of those things.

“When they wouldn’t tell me if Bernadette was safe, I spit in Constantine’s coffee.” Aaron strokes his fingers through my hair and smiles down at me. “He left me in the interrogation room for six hours by myself.”

I almost laugh, but the sound hurts too much trying to come out, so I don’t bother. Instead, I curl my arms around Aaron’s neck and lean up on my tiptoes, watching his long lashes flutter as our lips brush and then ignite with that usual sense of desperation and need. We were separated for too long; we can’t get enough. Even as we kiss, and I dig my fingers into his wavy chestnut hair, I know that I could fall forever into him and I would never hit the ground. It would be an endless sensation of floating, of falling, of dizzying heights rushing past at the speed of light.

The home phone rings, and I startle so bad that I end up nicking Aaron’s lip with my teeth.

“Cal ...” I breathe, glancing back.

“Go,” Aaron says, pressing an aggressively affectionate kiss to my forehead and giving me a small push with his hand. I notice that his cast is missing which annoys me since it’s about two weeks early for it to come off. But I’ll chastise him later.

This could be Callum, calling to let us know he’s okay.

It has to be Callum, right?

Because as much as he jokes around about being the first of us to die, I won’t allow it. I won’t allow any of them to sacrifice themselves or be snuffed out in a stupid fucking gang war. Prescott—and the city of Springfield—belong to us. We deserve to rule first; we deserve to be *happy* first.

“I feel like I’m in a fucking nineties movie,” I grumble, because dark humor is Cal’s thing, and it makes me feel closer to him when I use it. “Hello?”

I swear to fuck, if this is someone asking me if I like scary movies, I’m going to kill them and bury their body under an endangered plant so that nobody can legally dig it up.

“Bernadette, it’s Sara,” the detective begins, and I sigh. It’s a sound so heavy and ominous that it causes police girl to hesitate. *Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.* I don’t want to hear from Sara motherfucking Young.

That is ... unless she has news about Callum.

I close my eyes.

“Where did you get this number from?” I ask, but then I realize that I already know the answer: off my fucking phone. “Never mind, don’t answer that. It’ll just piss me off.”

“Honey, I need to talk to you for a moment. Are you alone?”

That gives me pause, but I just shrug my shoulders, remember that she can’t see me, and sigh again. “Close enough. What’s up?”

“Well, the hospital just called your cell.”

I stare at the wall above the phone where an old painting sits. It’s a wolf, painted by Aaron’s mom back in high school. I’d wonder why it was still hanging here if I didn’t understand how screwed up mommy issues could be. My mother allowed her husband to rape my sister. How could I ever forget that? Why don’t I just want her dead and fucking gone?

“Okay,” I say, because I have no idea where this is going. “And?”

“They’d like you to call them back. It sounds urgent. Do you want to write their number down?” I just narrow my eyes slightly. I don’t like the direction of this conversation. Immediately I’m thinking internal bleeding or some shit. I let them draw my blood when I was there, do some tests. Maybe a result came back that isn’t good? At least if I call them back now, maybe I’ll understand why I feel like such shit at the moment.

“I have Google, but thanks for letting me know. I’ll call them.” I hang up and turn back to the table, grabbing Aaron’s laptop off the edge of the couch arm on the way.

“What’s up?” Vic asks, but I just shake my head.

“I need to call the hospital real quick,” I say, and he gives me a dark look. “I have no idea what for. That was Sara Young; she said they called my phone, so I’m calling them. Chill out.”

My stomach clenches again, and I let out a long, low breath, putting my hand across my belly. Period cramps plus body aches from being beaten on the front lawn of my school. Fucking *ouch*.

I sit down at the table with the cordless phone receiver, flip open the laptop, and search for Joseph General.

“The hospital,” Aaron says, taking the seat across from mine. He moves gingerly, like maybe he got the crap beat out of him, too? He’s still wearing the medical boot which makes his survival during the shooting even more miraculous. If I’d had a broken fibula and a medical boot, I might not’ve been able to make it out alive. “What could they possibly be calling about?”

I shrug my shoulders, trying to play it off as nothing.

“Probably after me to pay the bill since I don’t have insurance.” I smile tightly because jokes about our fucked-up for-profit healthcare system aren’t really all that funny (it’s actually entirely probable that that’s why the hospital called) and then dial the number.

Hael sits beside me, Oscar across from him, while Vic takes the head of the table. They eat pizza and share the two-liters of soda around, not bothering to get a glass. Well, Oscar gets a glass. Nobody else does. And, shocker of all shocks, he actually *eats*.

I just stare at him as the phone rings and rings, offering me one useless menu after another.

“What?” he asks finally, setting the crust down on his plate—also the only boy to use a plate by the way. “See something you like?”

“You,” I say succinctly, and that shuts him the fuck up. I avert my gaze back to the pizza boxes and try not to let that itchy feeling beneath my skin take over. Callum was alive as of six hours ago. Alive enough to get up and leave that basement. Alive enough to consider not leaving a trail.

That’s something, right? Because ... “Hope is the thing with feathers,” I breathe aloud, not meaning to quote Emily Dickinson but doing it anyway. Because, deep down, in my heart of hearts, I am a poet and not a killer.

“*That perches in the soul,*” Oscar continues for me, picking up his pizza crust and finishing it as I try to fight back a weary smile.

“Fuck, you two are weird sometimes,” Hael murmurs, but not like he dislikes our weirdness. No, quite the contrary. As much as he and Oscar squabble, I know they love each other in that strange, obsessive sort of way that the rest of us do. Havoc’s way. Poison and possession, delivered down the throat in a dose as smooth as cognac.

Finally, after a half-dozen department transfers, I get someone at the hospital. She looks my name up, transfers me, and then I’m finally on the phone with the doctor.

“Hello Bernadette, how are you?” she asks, but I’m officially done with peopling today, so I barely grunt in acknowledgement.

“Fine. What’s going on?” I ask, listening as the woman shuffles around on the other end of the line.

“I just wanted to let you know that we got your blood results back. Bernadette, you’re pregnant.” The doctor pauses a moment before

continuing, saying something about the injuries I received today, how a hard blow to the belly can cause miscarriage in early pregnancy.

I hang up the phone on her.

When I set the receiver down, I see that my knuckles are as white as virgin snow.

I choke out a laugh and stand up, my chair scraping across the floor with a loud sound.

“Everything okay?” Vic asks, like he’s a fucking mind reader. Frankly, I wouldn’t put that skill past him. He very well might be able to. I hardly know what to say, so I just stare at the wolf painting for a moment. It’s in mid-howl which is funny, considering the whole *Cry Havoc* trend I started.

I bite my lower lip.

Another cramp makes me close my eyes and clench my hands into fists.

Shit.

No, no, this is a situation for the word *fuck*. I don’t care if I’ve used it a hundred and sixty times today. There are just certain times in life when that word is the only appropriate thing to say.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Motherfucker, cocksucking, son of a bitch!

“Excuse me,” I say, heading for the stairs and pounding up them as fast as I can. I shove my way into the bathroom and then kick the door closed behind me, putting my hands on the counter and letting my head hang down.

The pills that Oscar got me, they were real. I’ve been taking them like I’m supposed to. Maybe not at the same time every day, but every day, nonetheless. This is bullshit. This is complete and utter bullshit is what this is.

Oh, come on, you know that birth control pills are only ninety-nine percent effective. That means that out of every hundred people, somebody gets knocked up. And not taking them at the same time each day ... that makes the percentage of failure even higher.

I lift my gaze to my reflection and stare at myself for a minute.

If I was pregnant when I stepped into the halls of Prescott High yesterday, I’m not anymore. I just know it. I know it because I’m bleeding again and there’s red all down my thighs. My belly cramps as if in response to that thought.

A soft knock at the door makes me jump just before Aaron cracks it open to peer in at me.

“You okay, Bernie?” he asks, and the genuine concern in his voice stabs me right through the heart. He looks down at the floor beneath my feet, spattered with red. He lifts those gold-green eyes up to mine as I clench my jaw against the rush of feeling that spirals through me. Am I relieved? Pissed-off? Am I upset? All of those things?

“I think ...” I start, but the words just don’t seem to want to come out. Aaron slips in the door and closes it behind him, leaning against it with his massive body. When did he get so big? When did he outgrow that gangly teenage form and get muscles in his upper arms like that?

I turn back toward the mirror and find my green eyes again. I have dark circles, too, just like Aaron. Drawn, pale, tired. Determined. My eyes shine with conviction in a way they never have before, even if the rest of me looks like a corpse.

“You think what?” he asks carefully, voice low and neutral. Gentle but not patronizing. I’m just glad it’s him in here and not Victor. I cannot deal with Vic’s reaction to this right now. He’s going to fucking *explode*.

With shaking hands, I shove my pants to the floor and tear off my shirt, climbing into the shower and turning the water on cold. A gasp of surprise escapes my throat when the cool water cascades over my skin, sending crimson swirls down the drain. *Fuck, shit, bitch. How am I supposed to bring this up today of all days?! And while Callum is still missing?*

I’m not a religious woman, but if I were, I’d curse out whatever god or goddess is in charge of my existence. This is ... well, it’s bullshit is what it is. I close my eyes and lean my head back against the wall. *When did this happen?* I wonder, because there’s no way I’m that far along. Likely, this is a chemical pregnancy—meaning it’s five weeks or less along. If that’s the case, then I don’t need medical treatment but ... holy fuck.

I open my eyes again to find him watching me.

“Do you need a moment to yourself?” Aaron asks, raising a brow at me. He taps tattooed fingers against the door behind him and then comes to stand beside the tub, the medical boot making his walk just a bit lopsided. “I’m inclined to say fuck that and stay here anyway, but if you really want me to go ...” He trails off and then tucks his hands into the pockets of the borrowed sweats he’s wearing. Second time getting arrested during senior year. Good

for him. A Prescott boy through and through.

“Would you?” I ask, leaning my naked body against the wall of the shower. Aaron tries to be a gentleman, but his eyes make a sweep of my body just once before landing on my face again. “I mean, if I told you to go, would you really?”

He pauses for a long moment and then smiles tightly at me. A single dimple appears on his face, despite the gravity of the moment. Cal missing, the GMP on our asses, the feds with our phones. That’s how you really know you’re in love, when you’d rather face a crisis with your partner than an eternity of bliss alone.

“I ...” I start, feeling the words get stuck in my throat. They’re suddenly sticky and strange, almost sharp as they scrape through to my lips. I may very well start bleeding from the mouth next. “The hospital ...” Reaching up a hand, I press it against the side of my head and close my eyes again. As Shakespeare once said, *Uneasy is the head that wears a crown*. Nobody ever said this was going to be easy. My eyes open and I meet Aaron’s green-gold gaze. “I’m pregnant.”

There’s a moment there where he doesn’t move, doesn’t even blink. He looks down at the water which, at least for now, has started to run clear. Then back up at me again. His face betrays nothing, a façade of calm meant to help me keep my own feelings in check. When I look too deeply into his eyes, however, I can see every emotion he’s trying so hard to contain.

“Bernie,” Aaron begins, blinking at me as he takes my face between his hands. My stomach muscles seize, and I grimace against the pain. “Is that what the hospital called about?”

I just stare back at him and then reach my hands up to lay them over his. Our fingers intertwine, pretty *HAVOC* tatted knuckles on either side. His left, my left. He leans in and kisses my lips, a soft, easy kiss with no demands for more. Just a promise to listen.

“Was,” I correct, frowning hard. “Was pregnant. I’m pretty sure this is a chemical pregnancy—”

He cuts me off with another kiss, one that lingers just a tad longer. He only pulls back enough to talk, our mouths brushing together with each word.

“You don’t have to analyze every little thing. You don’t have to be Vic to be queen. Are you okay?”

“I ...” I start, but I’m not sure what to say. How do I feel? I don’t know. I

didn't want to be pregnant, so I feel relieved. Also, a little bit sad. And maybe I want to kill every motherfucker in the GMP to make up for that beating I got on the lawn. "It's not really that big of a deal, but it's ... weird."

Aaron smiles at me and then reaches up to push wet hair back from my forehead. Me and him, we're parents already. We have Heather and Ashley and Kara locked away in an ivy-covered tower known as Oak River Elementary. The last thing either of us needs or wants is a baby, but it still isn't fair that I had to find out about this the same day I started bleeding and cramping.

"I'll be okay," I promise, sliding my palms along his arms until I get to his taut shoulders. "Just ... bring me one of the reusable cups from the duffel I have in your room, make up a hot water bottle, and grab some ibuprofen?"

Aaron nods, but he doesn't let go of me, pressing a kiss to either of my cheeks and one to my forehead. His breath feathers against me and I shiver, the water steaming around us as it finally reaches its maximum temperature, scalding me the way I want it to. I stare at the *Bernadette* tattoo on his right arm.

First chance I get, I'm tattooing all of their names on my skin. I don't care where. I just want them somewhere. That, and I want my name on all of them. Does that make me a crazy person?

I lick some of the warm water from my lips and look back at Aaron's face. As soon as he gets out of here, he's going to punch something. I can tell by the way he skims my bruises, taking in all the damage I received at the hands of a rival gang. Can't say I blame him. If they'd done this to my girl—whether she wanted a baby or not—I'd be furious.

Inconsolable.

Murderous.

"Don't tell anyone else yet," I say, touching my hand to his arm. His skin is hot enough to burn; it draws me to him like a moth to the flame. That's probably how they think of themselves, Havoc. Like the flame that burned away my wings and kept me trapped here in Prescott.

Well, I know for a fact that Aaron feels that way. Oscar. Maybe Hael. Cal, I don't know. Vic is the one who would gladly flick the wheel on a lighter and offer it up.

Toxic. Irresponsible. Broken.

That's me and those boys and this pregnancy-that-isn't.

I exhale.

“I won’t,” Aaron promises, his voice a fierce slash, some of that anger managing to creep out even though he tries so hard to hide it. “I promise I won’t.” He lets go of my face finally and steps back. “Take your time. When you get out, we can start looking for Cal again. Then you can tell them all together.”

He turns to leave, pauses, and then whirls around so quickly that a small sound of surprise escapes me. Aaron slams his palms against the shower wall on either side of me and takes my mouth like he honestly believes all problems in this world can be solved with the right kind of kiss.

As my fingers come up to brush against his muscular chest, and his tongue takes over my mouth, I think that there’s at least a small chance that he’s right.

“Keep ahold of my leash, your majesty. Because the next time I see somebody with that hideous fucking clown tattoo, I’m going to go daddy Aaron on their asses.” He grabs the side of my neck, kisses me hard enough to bruise, and then lets go, staring down at me with steam and dew collecting on his wavy hair. “Fuck, you’re the strongest woman I’ve ever met,” he breathes, finally turning and leaving the bathroom in such a whirlwind that the steam swirls around like clouds in a summer breeze.

A smile almost manages to catch on my lips, but then I remember I have to actually take my cup out and the bleeding starts all over again. There are a few clots, but nothing unusual. If the hospital hadn’t told me my blood tests showed that I was pregnant, I might not realize this was a miscarriage at all.

Aaron comes back shortly, placing the pills on my tongue and sweeping some wet hair back from my face. He leaves a reusable menstrual cup and some fresh clothes on the counter, so that when I reluctantly drag myself out a few minutes later, I have something clean and blood-free to put on.

With my new cup in place—a much heavier duty one this time—and a thick pad on my panties, I mop up the water on the floor with my foot on a crumpled towel, fluff my red-tinged blond hair with my fingers, and ready myself for what I hope isn’t another fruitless search of the city.

I’m not two steps out of the door before someone is wrapping their hand across my lips, reeking of blood and smelling like wet copper.

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CHAPTER

SIX

A captive shout claws its way up my throat, but my instincts are even sharper, faster. I go to slam an elbow back into the gut of whoever this is and find myself surprised when they block my move. Underneath the metallic scent of pain, there's the familiar murmur of fresh cotton sheets, hung on the line to dry on an easy summer afternoon. Talc. Aftershave. *Callum*.

"Please don't scream," he rasps against my ear, licking the shell of it with a hot tongue. "Help me come down first." He removes his hand from my mouth as I whirl around to face him, filled with an odd mixture of relief and ire that smells an awful lot like fear.

He's standing in the shadows of the upstairs landing, hood up, covered in blood. There's something *off* about the pale line of his throat. That ire inside of me very quickly reveals itself for what it is: terror.

Cal glances down at his right hand and flexes bloodied fingers, like he's surprised he's still alive.

"Where the fuck have you been?!" I choke out, my own hands shaking at my sides. "We've been looking all over for you!"

"I passed out," he says, pauses, thinks for a minute. "Yeah, I passed out. When I woke up, I couldn't remember where I was." He touches his hand to his throat and then cringes slightly, pulling his hand away and staring at it like he isn't sure where all the extra blood is coming from. "The city is crawling with cops; I barely made it back."

“I was losing my fucking mind,” I whisper, wondering how long it might take the other boys to realize there’s an ‘intruder’ in the house.

The sound of a hammer being pulled back precedes the lights flicking on. *Guess that answers my question.*

Victor is standing at the top of the stairs. He takes note of the fact that our mystery newcomer is Callum, and then lowers the gun without apology.

“Glad to see you’re still alive,” Vic says, and even if the words themselves are placid and neutral, there’s a warmth in his tone that tells me definitively that Victor Channing loves his boys as much as I do. He might not want to fuck them—come on, no way that guy is into dick; he’s too basic—but he loves them just the same. “Want to tell me about it?”

“I need you to go,” Callum says, and there’s something in his tone that’s stretched out and terrifying. My body responds to that ice with an inappropriate level of heat. It fills me from head to toe, makes my breath hitch, my thighs clench. I curl my hands into fists, my nails ragged and digging painfully into my palms.

Just like Pamela used to do, leave bloody crescents in her wake.

I blink her away as I look between the two men. Both are my soul mates. I’ve recognized this recently, that the soul in all of its eternal beauty couldn’t possibly be so limited as to having only one perfect match. I have five of them. Five letters, one word, one desperate family that I’d do anything to keep.

Even give my own life.

A shudder ripples through me, and I close my eyes.

In all of this, in all the jokes and the foreshadowing and the fear ... the one who has always been most likely to die is ... *me*.

After all, nobody gets this lucky this often. Aaron, alive. Callum, alive. Somebody has to fucking pay for that good karma.

I open my eyes and step forward, putting my hand on Callum’s chest. His hoodie is wet with blood, almost soggy. I don’t like that, the way it feels cold when I touch it. When I look back, Victor is watching us with an inscrutable expression. Every time we meet, and every time we part, the universe shifts a little. I know, because I can feel it. We are all the centers of our own realities except ... maybe Havoc is the center of mine.

Vic tucks the gun in his waistband and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. Beautifully predictable. It takes nicotine to curtail his possessive urges

toward me. I like that, knowing there's nothing in the world but tobacco and my unyielding stare that can get him to turn away.

"You're not going to hurt her?" he asks, which is an interesting question. It's because Victor's seen this side of Callum before that he even thinks to wonder that, and I'm not entirely certain that *I* have. When I glance back, Cal's looking down at his hands again and a gasp is tearing from my lips.

It looks like somebody attempted to slit his throat.

"Do you really need to ask me that?" Cal asks, looking up from his bloodied hands and then cocking his head to one side. Like a dog. Like a wolf. His blue eyes are empty and endless, terrifying when they drop to me and I see every ounce of focus that he possesses plunged into me like a knife.

To get rid of Callum, I'd have to kill him. He'd sit still and let me do it, open his throat with a blade. But that would be the only way, to put him in an early grave.

"No," Cal says finally, body sagging. He puts a hand out and catches himself against the wall as I cling to him and do my best to provide support. "I would never hurt Bernadette. You know that."

Victor lights up his smoke, his eyes finding mine. And how is my body reacting to all of this stress? In the most inappropriate and ridiculous way possible. I exhale sharply and turn back to Callum, listening as Vic's heavy footsteps carry him back down the stairs again.

"We need to get you to a doctor," I say, but Callum is already shaking his head.

"No doctors. I won't be separated from you right now." He takes my hands in his, trembling so hard that I wonder if he isn't going to pass out on me right here in the hallway. His blue eyes blaze with a desperate need to stay awake. "Go get Oscar's medical kit, some orange juice, and the leftover saline bags from when Aaron was shot."

Cal looks me so deeply in the face that I swear I can feel his soul brush up against me, like a cat marking its master's ankles. My fingers curl around his hands and I lift up on my tiptoes, pressing our foreheads together briefly before I turn and flee down the stairs as fast I can.

"Callum needs a doctor," I say to the boys as soon as I hit the bottom floor and find Hael pacing, Vic smoking a joint, and Aaron watching me with a tenderness that my parched soul needs so badly that it seems to hurt. "Or Nurse Yes-Scott."

“Nurse Yes-Scott is dead,” Oscar says, his voice a Lucullan feast for the ears. *Whitney was shot?* I wonder, thinking of the blood strewn linoleum and the metal lockers decorated with crimson. Where was she when the GMP stormed the building? Did she suffer? I shake my head to clear it. “How bad is he?”

“Blood, everywhere,” I say with a harsh laugh, thinking of the scene back in the basement. How much of your blood can you lose and still live? It’s like, forty percent or something right? Four pints, a half-gallon ... “It seems like someone tried to slit his throat. He says he doesn’t want a doctor though; he wants me to get Oscar’s medical kit.” I nod in his direction and he stands right away, sweeping past me with the smell of cinnamon to retrieve it from the cabinet. There’s something in the way he hands it over to me that makes me shiver. “And the extra saline from Aaron’s GSW.”

Oscar moves over to a different cabinet while I grab the plastic jug of orange juice along with a clean glass. Hael has already moved over and is leaning his elbows against the countertop, frowning and pissed all the way off. But not at me or Cal or whatever, *for us*.

“You think we need to knock his ass out and take him to the hospital anyway?”

I give Hael a look, but I don’t have to answer that question. If Callum dragged himself all the way back here, then this is where he wants to be. That, and I trust him enough to know the extent of his own injuries. If he thinks he can get through this on his own, then I believe him.

“Leave Bernadette alone to deal with him,” Victor commands, his voice smooth and easy, betraying none of the stress that he’s holding in his shoulders. Aaron glances briefly his way and then flicks his attention to me. Our shared knowledge of the miscarriage makes me twitchy, but I say nothing. “He needs to be left alone for now.”

“Understood,” Oscar purrs, leaning over and putting his elbows on the counter to match Hael’s pose. He stretches out like a cat and then reaches up with two fingers of his left hand, pushing his white glasses up his nose as he slides two silver eyes over to me. “Better hurry. When Callum gets in these moods, he’s unpredictable.”

“We’re here if you need us,” Aaron assures me, and I nod, taking my supplies up the stairs. As I go, I hear them immediately delve back into the thick of things. “Are we even okay here for the night if Cal managed to sneak

in? I know he's a god, but holy shit, Victor. He got past the feds while bleeding to death."

"I'm sure our crew saw him coming and he asked them to keep quiet," Victor rationalizes, and then: "I wonder how many members of the GMP he murdered on the way back? We'll leave for the safe house in the morning."

The safe house.

I wonder about that as I head straight for the boys' room and find Cal passed out on Oscar's bed. He's bleeding all over those perfectly creased gray sheets, staining them crimson.

"Hey," I whisper, crawling up on the bed and reaching out to put my hand against his forehead. His skin is cool and clammy, but he's still breathing, blond lashes flutter as he finally cracks his eyes open. And then, despite everything, despite how far up shit creek we are right now, he manages a smile. "Are you sure you won't go to the hospital? How much blood have you lost?"

"The neck wound was shallow; it's stopped bleeding." Cal forces himself to sit up with a groan, body quivering as he shoves up one sleeve of his bloodied hoodie to show me the fucking *hole* in his arm. "Gunshot from a forty-five. Went straight through." He wets his pretty pink lips and then uses two fingers to spread the torn fabric near his shoulder. "Broken board got me here."

"What the hell happened to you?" I breathe, my words calm but my hands shaking as I pour a glass of orange juice and hand it out to him. Cal takes it with a small nod of thanks, continues to smile at me, and then tosses the rest of it back.

I stare at him, and I can't help but remember the first day of school when he sat down across from me at a table in the cafeteria. "*Bernadette, right?*" he'd asked when he damn well knew what my fucking name was. When he'd been stalking me.

If I were talking to any other woman besides myself—especially someone like my little sister Heather—then I would tell her to get the fuck away from these guys, run as far and fast as she could. Stalking isn't sexy. It's fucked-up. And yet, when Cal holds out his glass for a refill of juice, my heart just melts for him and I know that even if he is a creepy psycho stalker, he's my creepy psycho stalker.

"I love you," Callum tells me, just as I start to pour the juice. I end up

sloshing an inordinate amount on the bed, but I guess it doesn't matter since it smells like wet pennies and mud from the bottom of Cal's boots. "You know that, don't you? I'm sorry if I haven't said it in so many words." He reaches up and ruffles his angelic blond hair with his slashed and splinter-filled fingers. I'm going to need a pair of tweezers to get most of them out.

Cal downs the second glass of juice and passes it back to me while I consider my response to his statement.

"Callum ..." I start, and he chuckles, reaching out for the medical kit. Flicking it open with shaking fingers, he removes a sterile wipe and begins to clean a spot on his inner elbow, swiping away the blood and grime. I reach out and snatch a pair of gloves, slipping them on before I take over the task from him. "Pretty sure I've loved you since I was eight." I take an unopened needle from the bag, tear it open, and attach it to the saline bag.

I've done this before, but only on cats. Penelope once found a litter of abandoned kittens in a trash can on our street. She took them to the nearest vet but since we didn't have any money, they refused to help. I guess the guy felt bad because he showed us how to give saline and sent us home with a bag and some needles. The kittens seemed to get better until Pam found them.

She drowned each and every one in the bathtub. When Penelope and I saw what she was doing ... Only one cat was saved, and he lives with a nice family whose kids go to Fuller High.

Anyway, I check Cal's inner arm for a vein and then do my best to slide the needle in with a single, easy motion. It's as if my body can sense that the shaking isn't helping either of us, and as soon as I touch that metal to Callum's skin, my hands go as still as a surgeon's. With the needle in place, I lift the bag up and give it a gentle squeeze.

"Say it to me," he breathes, his face far too close for comfort. We can't be like this, desperate and needing each other the way we are. Even though this is definitely *not* the time or place for it, I crawl into his lap and straddle him. He palms my hips with a long, deep sigh, closing his eyes as the fluids drain down the tube and into his arm. "Say it in simple words."

"I love you, Callum Park," I say easily, because I'm not at all ashamed of it. I love Havoc. All five of them. And if I ever tried to deny it in the past, it was only because I didn't trust myself. Because I wasn't being *honest* with myself. I won't do that anymore because more than anything, I want to make sure I'm worthy of that fucking crown. "Now, don't you dare fucking die on

me.”

I rock against him, fully aware that neither of us is in any state to fuck. Doesn't matter. If stirring up a little passion can help us both breathe easier then screw it. I'll rub myself all over my stalker's dick.

“I killed six men just to get back here,” he whispers against my mouth. But not like he's looking for praise. No, it's more of an ... observation. “Nobody can keep me from you, Bernadette. Not even the world.”

I kiss him again, but it's slow and tentative, almost unsure. I don't want to hurt him. And holy fuck, is he hurting right now. Cal is the one that cups the back of my head and brings some heat to the connection between our lips, tasting me and savoring whatever it is that he finds there. I want him to dance for me again, to show me with his body what he sometimes struggles to say with words. *Love me for every dark, ugly, hideous thing that I am.*

“We should get those stitches in,” I murmur absently, letting him take over holding the bag. It's a little weird, to see a man holding a bag of saline that's connected to his arm, but it works. I've seen Pamela, in her part-time work at the nursing home, set up plenty of IVs. And let's be honest: anything that bitch can do, I can do. Ten times better at that.

“I'd rather feel the warmth of your body pressed against me,” Cal murmurs, nuzzling the side of my face like an animal seeking out the comfort of his mate. “You ground me, Bernadette. Mason was right: I *am* still human. But only because of you.”

“Who's Mason?” I ask, but Cal just keeps on smiling.

“Stitches, let's get them over with,” he whispers, his voice as hoarse and dark as it's ever been. Whoever Mason is, I imagine he's the one that put Callum in this state. And Cal, he isn't used to coming up against anyone that's at his level.

I scoot back and open the kit. I've never actually put a stitch in human flesh before, but I took home ec during freshman year. That counts, right? Besides, I saw Victor do it to me, that day Billie stabbed me in the bathroom, that very same bathroom where I ducked to hide from the shooter only yesterday. *Poor Stacey. Poor fucking Stacey.*

“Should I go get Aaron's laptop so we can Google this?” I ask, already missing the ease of having my phone around. But Cal's already shaking his head.

“No,” he says, leaning back into Oscar's pillows. I wonder if 'O' will

mind. I also wonder if ‘O’ will ever let *me* call him that. It’s a cute nickname, but if he wants to save it for his Cal bromance that’s fine by me. “I’ll guide you.” He nods his chin at the kit, a calm and peaceful expression settling over his features. When he first got here, he actually looked like he might kill someone—even Vic. This is better, this strange expression of contentment. “Needle driver,” he begins, pointing at one item in the kit. “Tissue forceps. Scissors, obviously. Needle and thread. We’re going to do an interrupted suture which means you’ll cut and tie off each stitch as we go.”

After cleaning his arm off with another antiseptic wipe, I do as he tells me, using the needle driver to hold the tiny, curved needle and threading it through his skin, just above the fat that I can see inside the wound. We start with the gunshot wound on his arm, this clean hole that goes straight through him. It looks too neat, too pretty to actually be real.

“I want you to go to the hospital. It isn’t like the VGTF doesn’t know about the shooting. Sara Young was looking for you.” My words come out quiet and low, almost absent-minded. In reality, all of my attention and focus is on this needle, this thread, these scissors. I make a stitch, tie it off. Make another stitch, tie that off, too.

“I’ll go tomorrow,” he promises me, azure eyes like bright gems in a pale face. “Tonight, I’m staying with you.” I look up to find him watching me and not the needle. He’s more interested in my expression, in the way my hair falls forward like a red and blond shield when I lean down to continue the stitches. Once we’re finished, I start on the exit wound. I have no idea if this is proper medicine or not—very likely it isn’t—but we’re ratchet as hell here in Prescott. We do our own thing.

“Callum, I was pregnant,” I say, before I lose my nerve. There’s a long pause in his breathing that freaks me out, so I move my eyes from his wound to his face, only to find him with his eyes closed. Panic sweeps over me in a wave and a scream gets caught in my throat. My worst fear in the world would be to lose one of my boys. But then he blinks a few times and exhales.

“Oh, Bernie,” he tells me, face breaking. There’s sympathy there, but behind that emotion, there’s nothing but the endless black of *rage*. It startles me enough that the needle slips and Cal sucks in another sharp breath. *He isn’t dying, Bernie. He’s in pain.* Each time the needle goes into his flesh, he stops breathing until I’m pulling the thread through. It must hurt like a bitch. At the hospital, they always numb the spot first. We’re just running on a wing

and a prayer here.

It occurs to me that I should get him some fucking booze. Or weed. Or both.

“When you were beaten on the lawn,” Cal says next, surprising me. He saw that? I keep my attention on the stitches, trying to give him time to process what I’m saying. “They beat you into miscarrying.” It isn’t a question. I told you: Callum understands me in a way that nobody else does.

Each boy holds a different spark, like a different color in a single rainbow. It just isn’t complete without all those shades, now is it?

“I’m not upset,” I say, which probably isn’t true. I am upset. But in a way that’s hard to explain. There’s relief there, too, which I feel guilty about even though I know I shouldn’t. I think, if this had happened any other way, I’d be alright. It’s just the idea that unsolicited violence is what got me to this point.

My cramps squeeze again, and I choke on my next breath as pain washes over me.

“You’re in pain,” Cal observes, but that’s a funny thing for someone with a GSW, a stab wound, and a slit throat to say. “You don’t have to want a baby to be upset, you know. You can just be upset, even if it’s for no reason at all.”

“Don’t lecture me,” I warn him, finishing the final stitch on the exit wound. Next, I spread apart the fabric at his shoulder and grimace at the torn, ragged edges of flesh. He *really* needs to see a fucking doctor. But I can also understand that the endless chasm of rage that I see in him, it needs to be soothed, too. And he can only do that if he feels safe, if he’s with *me*. “If anything, I should be the one telling *you* that.”

I take a brief moment to touch my fingers to his throat, and he shudders, snatching my wrist so hard that I actually cry out from the shock of it. But there’s no pain, not the way he holds me. Instead, his face is sad, distant, a reflection of the involuntarily reaction to having his neck touched.

He *almost* didn’t have to live this life. He *almost* got the fuck out of here.

The thing is, you don’t always have to run to make things better. You can fight. You can inflict change on a world that rallies against it as if it’s the fucking plague. That’s what we’re going to do here, take this city under our dark wings and give it the underground it deserves, one that allows the normal people who dwell in the sun and live on the surface a chance to live a normal life.

People like Heather, like Kara, like Ashley. People like that girl, Alyssa,

that we rescued from the beach house. People like Ms. Keating. Even people like Sara Young.

Because no matter what, the world will have an underground, an unsavory fragment of darkness that casts shadows across anything that dares to play in the sun. If we can control it, if we can redirect that darkness, funnel it, punish it, leash it, then we can change things for Prescott. For the city. Maybe even more than that.

I have a feeling that if we can do this, if we can drive the GMP out of our borders, if we can subvert Ophelia's plans and collect Victor's inheritance, that we'll be able to do all that and more.

Like I said, I still want to believe.

Believe the world is good.

Believe that love prevails.

Believe that there is justice.

Callum drops his hand, shuddering as my fingers probe his neck. The cut is gnarly, but obviously not deep enough to have severed any major arteries. Thank fucking god. We all remember Danny and how quickly a neck wound can result in an earthy bed six feet under.

I relent and go back to the wound on his shoulder instead. He's right: the one on his neck is fairly shallow. We'll wrap it with gauze. I wouldn't attempt to stick a fucking needle in my lover's throat anyway.

"I'm sorry that I didn't protect you better," Cal tells me, but I don't look at him. I'm too busy working on the wound at his shoulder, the one that scares me even more than the gunshot.

"You saved my life," I tell him, thinking of his masked face appearing from the vent in the ceiling. "And that's not the first time either. Don't apologize to me for anything." I continue my work in silence, glancing over to find him with his eyes closed, racked with pain.

Once I finish with his shoulder, I put the kit away and try to climb off the bed.

Cal snatches my wrist and yanks me back, so hard and so fast that I end up off-balance, falling into him and landing on his chest as he sinks back into the pillows. He sighs and curls his arms around me, holding me close. My fingers clench against his bloody hoodie of their own accord.

I just can't resist the rhapsodic poison that is Havoc.

"Let me get you something to smoke or drink," I murmur, but Cal just

tucks my head against the side of his scarred and ruined neck, stroking blue-tipped fingernails down my spine. I can feel the heat of his fingertips, even through the Ruth Bader Ginsburg tank that I'm wearing. *RIP to one of the baddest bitches around.*

"In a minute," Cal breathes into my hair, making me shiver. The idea that he's having this sort of effect on me is just further proof that I'm already intoxicated by his presence. "Let me feel your heartbeat first."

We lay there together until the sun has fully risen and the night's ebony fingers have furled from the sky. Then, as Callum sleeps softly beneath me, I get up and go in search of whiskey and a few joints.

"He still alive up there?" Vic asks when I appear at the bottom of the stairs, streaked with Cal's blood and dizzy enough that I wish I'd had some of that fucking OJ before coming down. I don't want Vic or Hael or Oscar to sense that someone's wrong before I get a chance to tell them.

"He seems okay," I hazard, drumming my chipped nails against the round top of the newel post. This Prescott bitch needs to get her fucking nails done. Like, Jesus, for a Prescott girl to have nails like I do now is considered a cardinal motherfucking sin. If you can't afford to get your nails done, you ask one of Stacey's girls and she'll do them for you provided her crew doesn't hate you.

Stacey.

I sigh, and the sound is distinctly melancholy. I'm mourning our school's queen bee for the friend she could've been, for the good person that she was.

Aaron is asleep on one sofa, clearly taking a shift while Vic sits with a shotgun and a cigarette at the table. Oscar is on his iPad, glancing briefly my way as I stand there, wrapped in a thick fog of emotion.

I have a lot to process.

We don't have a lot of time.

Tomorrow, we'll move to a safe house and I'll probably spend every second there missing the safe, easy normality of Aaron's house.

Hael appears from outside, stepping in the sliding glass doors as he taps the cordless receiver against his lips. His brown eyes slide over to mine and he smiles, the expression skin-deep at best. He's stressed-out. We all are.

"Brittany says she thinks her father is gearing up for a raid. She says it's habit for him to hide in his shop all night writing letters to the family, just in case. I'm inclined to believe her on this one, especially since I know she's

mentioned this to me sometime in the past.” Hael sets the phone down on the table as my eyes sweep past him to Vic, back to Oscar.

Now would be a good time to mention the miscarriage ...

“Don’t leave me, prima ballerina,” Cal whispers huskily from behind me. I jump, spinning around to his dark chuckle and finding him leaning his elbows on the railing at the top of the stairs. “You really think I’d let you slip away?”

“I’m getting you something to smoke, at the very least,” I grumble, going for what I know is one of the boys’ recreational weed stashes on the top shelf of a kitchen cabinet. I’m too short to reach it, even at five-ten, so Hael reaches over me and snatches a plastic bag full of joints instead, dropping them into my hand.

“Fucking hell,” Vic murmurs as he and Oscar look up at Cal, waiting at the top of the stairs for me. “You look like you got hit by a truck.”

“Piano wire,” Cal explains, his voice even darker and huskier than usual. He closes his eyes as I come back around the peninsula, snatching Vic’s bottle of whiskey off the surface of the table. Callum doesn’t need to be sober right now; the rest of us can hold down the fort just fine.

Besides, it’s unlikely the GMP would attack with the house surrounded by feds—ones that I’m quite sure are not in Maxwell Barrasso’s pocket. Sara Young ... she’s the type of person that cannot be bought. And if Brittany is telling Hael about a raid by the VGTF ... well, it isn’t for us, now is it? Not after yesterday, not with the plea deal on the table, not after all that questioning.

Sara was surprised that Havoc was able to defend Prescott High. She most definitely wasn’t prepping a search warrant and organizing a formal raid.

“A garrote?” Oscar clarifies and Cal gives a brisk nod, rising to his feet and looming over the railing in a way that makes me nervous. He’s shaking slightly, and I’m terrified he’s going to pass out and tumble over the side to the hallway below. Behind me, I hear the couch springs squeak as Aaron sits up, swiping both hands over his bleary face.

“A garrote,” Callum confirms as I glance back at him, his blue eyes staring down and into mine. He sees right through me, to all the tender, delicate parts underneath. On the outside, I know my shit. I’m a Prescott bitch through and through, but on the in ... there’s something about my own innocence that refuses to die. Cal recognizes that. He recognizes it because he’s a monster, but he’s *my* monster. That’s all that matters. “One of Maxwell’s enforcers

was at the school—Russ Bauer, I believe it was.” He coughs, closing his eyes against the pain as he rests his hands against the railing again. Callum Park is no stranger to pain, physical or otherwise. “*Sometimes pain is pretty, to the people who have too much of it,*” he told me once. If that’s true—and I’m starting to think it is—then I guess that’s why he’s so fucking beautiful to me.

“Figures,” Victor growls, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand straight up at the sound. I would not want to be on the receiving end of that anger. He cocks the shotgun for emphasis. Or maybe just because he’s pissed off with nobody to take that meticulously controlled temper out on. “You get him?”

Cal chuckles softly, as if anything about this situation could be construed as funny. That’s just one of the things I like about him though, how he can find humor in the macabre.

“Let me take a shower, and I’ll tell you everything I know.”

He waits for me to come up the stairs, accepting the joint and the lighter I pass over to him and lighting up with a raised brow in Aaron’s general direction.

“Don’t be a smartass. The girls are at Oak River, and school shootings most *definitely* break my no-smoking inside rule.”

Callum pulls away and turns toward the door to the bathroom as I follow after him. He strips his hoodie off and then lets it fall to the floor with a wet slap. That’s how soaked in blood it is. Red spatters the walls in tiny droplets.

My skin prickles with recognition as the other boys come up the stairs behind me. A lesser woman would run. Me, I accept the joint when Cal hands it back to me, ashing it in the sink, and then taking a long drag.

“Give us the abbreviated version for now,” Vic says, leaning against the doorjamb as I move into the bathroom behind Cal. He sits on the toilet, hands shaking as he goes to remove his shoes. When I step forward and offer to help, he doesn’t refuse. Instead, his blue eyes lift to mine in quiet strength.

I feel him so fucking hard in that moment; it’s inexplicable. This kind of connection, it only comes along a few times in infinity.

“Thank you,” Cal whispers, reaching his hand up to rub at the gash in the front of his throat. “I have to say, that man was worth his weight in gold.” Cal pauses, his lips twitching as the other boys crowd close to the door to listen in. “The enforcer, I mean. Just ... not quite as much gold as me.” He chuckles again and then stands up after I’ve removed both boots, letting his pants fall

to the floor. He doesn't seem to give a fuck that we're all standing right there. I mean, they all fucked me in front of one another, so maybe it doesn't bother them at all? Bet they've had dick measuring contests, too, like with literal rulers and shit. If I were a dude, I'd probably do, that. While I was at it, I'd grab the circumference, too—just for fun.

“He's dead?” Vic asks again and Cal casts a glance over his shoulder as he gets the water started. I'd thought before, when Callum started stripping in his room at his grandma's house, that when he took off his hoodie, he seemed more ... vulnerable. Now that I see him here, naked and bathed in the yellow of the bathroom light, I can fully admit that I've never been more wrong about anything. There is nothing vulnerable left in Callum Park, and that's what makes him so damn lovely. He has a single-minded focus that just so happens to be me.

“Oh, he's dead,” Cal confirms with a slight nod, turning back to the water and letting it stream over his hands, taking swirls of pink down the drain with it. “But it was close.”

Oscar waves his hand impatiently, gray eyes narrowed and focused on Callum like he, too, can see right through people.

“Keep going,” he prompts, removing his iPad from beneath his arm to take notes. Aaron and Hael hang back, sharing a joint of their own, the smoke mingling with the one clutched between my own fingers.

“When he took off, I chased after,” Callum explains, wetting his lower lip and closing his eyes as the water sluices between them. “Maybe not the best idea I've ever had.” Cal splashes water over his face and sighs. Personally, I'm too busy taking note of his myriad cuts and bruises. He looks like he got his ass kicked worse than me. “You should've seen the other guy,” Cal whispers huskily, and I flick my attention up to his face to find him grinning at me. I don't know how he can smile like that, injured the way he is. “Anyway, I managed to stumble on Mason Miller.”

A chill creeps over me at the sound of that name, even though I'm fairly certain I've never heard it before.

“Mason motherfucking Miller,” Victor says carefully, glancing over at Oscar. “Maxwell's second-in-command. So, you found him, but did you kill him?”

“Nope.” Cal turns back around and starts to scrub himself down with my French soap. Heh. *My boys, covered in my scent.* I could get used to that.

“He’s going to be a challenge; he anticipated every move I made before I even knew I was making it.” He doesn’t even open his eyes as he says this, like it’s not *that* big of a deal.

But it is.

Because anyone that Cal considers an equal or, hell, a *better* is terrifying to me.

“How do you stop a garrote?” I whisper, even though it’s slightly off-topic. I can’t even imagine.

Callum glances back at me, a grim smile on his beautiful mouth.

“This guy was a professional. He used a thin wire, twisted it, and then turned. In that case, you have to hit for the groin, palm strike to the ear, then kick him directly in the dick.” Cal smiles again, but his eyes darken with remembered violence. “Piece of shit. The only reason that I kicked his ass is because I’m in love.”

I flush all over and give him a look, one that he returns with a steady, even stare.

“It’s true. I have a reason to win.” Cal turns back to the spray as Victor snorts and I glance back to find Oscar frowning slightly.

“There’s no way James Barrasso managed to get his father’s second to take part in some half-assed plan. Ophelia and Trinity are bullshitting us for sure. They knew this was coming.” Oscar tucks his iPad back under his arm. “Maxwell knew about this.”

“They were after Stacey’s crew,” I say, because I haven’t even had a chance to tell Vic how the whole thing started. I bite my thumbnail and look up at Oscar. “She had a slip for Principal Vaughn’s office; I saw her in the hall just before she got shot.”

“And you were in the hall why?” Oscar purrs at me, and though I try my best to smirk, the expression just won’t form the way it’s supposed to. I’m too nervous, I think.

“I told Mr. Darkwood I was going to write a paper about the patriarchal influence on women’s opinions of pubic hair.” I shrug my shoulders as Oscar cocks a sharp brow at me and Hael howls with laughter from behind him. “Anyway, Vaughn must’ve called Stacey to his office. Either Mr. Darkwood was in on it, and sending me to Vaughn’s office was part of the master plan, or else I was somewhere I wasn’t supposed to be.”

Jesus. How many fucking times can a girl get ganked during her senior

year?

“If it weren’t for your text, Blackbird,” Hael begins, stepping up between Oscar and Vic. “I’d probably be dead. First shooter appeared about twenty seconds later; I barely made it out of the classroom.”

“Well then, you should thank Stacey; she saved all our lives.” I pause as I think about Mr. Darkwood. Him, too. I have no idea if he’s dead or not, but I hope not. I’ll let the guy dock a few points off my next assignment for the word *ebon*. I don’t mind. “Actually, never mind. You can thank me, too. In dick.” I gesture at him with the joint, and he snorts. But then I catch sight of Aaron’s face behind him and I just know that I can’t keep my new secret for long.

No lies, no secrets, right? That’s Havoc policy.

My stomach churns with nerves. Two guys down, three to go ... Only, I’m pretty sure these three are going to make a way bigger deal out of it than necessary. Vic with his possessive desire to impregnate me (fucking gross), Oscar with his emotional intimacy issues, and Hael with all his previous baby mama drama.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

I take another drag on the joint and attempt to avoid staring at Cal’s tight ass.

“Oh, don’t worry about asking for dick, princess. You’ll get plenty of it.” Vic lights up a cigarette and smirks at me. “If I were you, I’d be asking for get out of jail free cards instead.”

I flip him off, but my mind is already spinning with possibilities.

Ophelia made a deal with Trinity—likely by blackmailing her about being a brother-fucker—to marry Vic. This would, if she could pull it off, effectively give her a portion of the inheritance. She clearly has some connection with the GMP as well, likely also in regard to her mother’s money. So why send goons after us if they were already winning?

“They weren’t there to hurt Vic,” I muse, thinking on it for a moment as I taste the bitter tang of marijuana smoke on my tongue. The THC tingles as I pull in another hit, savoring the fruity flavor of it. Swear to fuck, whatever the strain of weed is, be it Pineapple Express or Pink Cookies or what the hell ever, it tastes exactly the way it’s named. “The GMP, I mean. I bet they were going to leave Victor alive.”

“You think they just wanted to clean house?” Vic clarifies, and I nod,

struggling to find all the pieces and put them together in some kind of order that makes sense. In order to fight an enemy that's stronger than you, you have to understand them. Subterfuge over brute strength.

And this, this is why Havoc needed a Havoc Girl.

I look over at Vic and see that he's waiting with his cigarette halfway to his mouth, like he actually cares what I have to say. I appreciate that. When he put that crown on my head, he wasn't just posturing. He meant the gesture with the entirety of his inky black heart.

"Ophelia would never let them kill you because the money then defaults to charity, yes?" Vic gives a curt nod, and it occurs to me that his grandmother must've really seen something awful in her daughter to think up a stipulation like that. Likely, the reason she wanted him to live with his alcoholic father was to keep him away from Ophelia as well. Because even a drunk is better than a devil. "And they didn't kill me when they had the chance either. There's something to that."

I remember James' rage when he finally caught up to me. "*Find the little bitch and put a bullet in her. I'm done playing games.*" The question is: what game, exactly, were they playing to begin with?

Victor just stares back at me as Cal shuts the water off and I scramble to get him a towel. He takes it and then throws an arm around my shoulders to keep himself upright while he dries off, getting me wet in the process—just not in the way I'd normally like.

A rush of hot heat between my thighs is not the welcoming signal that it usually is. I look down to find blood on my shorts. Again.

"Bernadette Channing," Vic warns, and I close my eyes for a moment against the penetrating depth of his stare.

Motherfucker.

I can't hold onto this any longer, so I just ... don't.

I open my eyes.

"The hospital called to tell me I was pregnant," I say, and I swear on the devil's tits, you could hear a pin drop in that bathroom. Hael glances back at me from his place in the hallway as Aaron offers up a melancholic but encouraging smile from behind him. "Also ... I'm ... not pregnant anymore." I gesture at my bloodied shorts for emphasis, forcing myself to meet Vic's gaze.

"*What?*" Victor's voice is so sharp that I almost cringe at the sound of it.

Instead, I just keep staring down those obsidian eyes of his, watching as he tries to keep control of his temper and almost fails. Vic. The master of control. He's fucking *seething*.

"Do we need to go to the hospital?" Oscar asks, his voice strangely calm, almost inflectionless. His emotions are locked away in a vault right now.

Hael, on the other hand, has braced his palm against the wall and is currently bent over, eyes squeezed shut. When he lifts his head and stares at me over Oscar's shoulder, I feel a wave of exhaustion crash over me. I need sleep. Desperately so.

"No," I say, because I'm not totally ignorant. Once, in tenth grade—just before she called Havoc on me, coincidentally—Kali thought she might be having a miscarriage. She'd slept with this boy, ugh, what was his name? That's right *Clarence*. I remember thinking that no kid born after 1945 would be named Clarence. Anyway, she thought she was pregnant, and then she thought she was having a miscarriage. We looked it up. "There's nothing they can do."

"Bernie," Vic says, his tone a warning. It's thick with fear and upset and possessiveness. In short, it's perfect. I ignore him, leaning down to flick open the lid of the toilet and then dropping my shorts as if I were Callum, as if I don't care that all five of them are staring at me in that way of theirs, like I'm the only thing in the world that matters.

I sit down on the toilet and then take the cup out, turning the water ruby red. It's a little weird that they're all still watching me, but I don't care. This is life. If we're going to be together, they may as well see every facet of it, even the less pretty parts.

"Don't," I growl out, but Vic just raises an eyebrow at me.

"Don't *what?*" he snaps, gritting his teeth and then exhaling sharply. He flicks his cigarette into the sink as Hael crowds between him and Oscar so that he can stand directly in front of me. Aaron moves up to fill the gap, and then they're all just there, inches away from me in the relatively small space of the bathroom.

"Don't get all overprotective and weird. These things happen." I try to rinse the cup in the sink and Vic takes it from me, washing it himself. I'm surprised, I'll admit. Guess there's more to him than just a primitive caveman asshole, huh?

"Are you fucking kidding me, wife?" Vic asks as he hands the cup back to

me. “That’s *all* that we do—get overprotective and weird.” He laughs, but the sound is hideous. Somebody—probably a lot of somebodies—are going to die for this. “It’s what Havoc was literally made for. So, you might be queen, but this is not an order I’m going to take.”

They all continue to stare at me, pants-less and vulnerable on the toilet, bleeding everywhere. Again. Always bleeding. Be it metaphorical or physical, that’s just my life.

“The GMP beat our baby out of my wife,” Victor says, and his voice is strange and dark and detached. He exchanges a look with Callum, and I swear to god, I can smell it in the air: the promise of vengeance.

And oh, how I recognize that scent better than any other.

“Shot up our school,” Aaron adds, but his voice cracks, and I know he’s struggling to give me space.

“Encroached on our turf,” Hael adds, his brown eyes meeting mine as I lean against the back of the toilet. The cramps are next fucking level, but I can deal with it. Because I’m a woman and everyone knows that women are magical goddesses with the pain tolerance of titans. Pluck a man’s eyebrow hair and he screams in agony. Women deliver people through their vaginas.

Get on our level, bitches.

“Made a deal with Ophelia.” Oscar pushes his glasses up his nose, but he isn’t smirking or sneering at me this time. Instead, he looks reserved, like he isn’t sure how to behave right now. I don’t blame him: emotional intimacy is terrifying. It’s the scariest thing there is because once you show your soft side to someone, they know exactly how to hurt you.

“Worked with the Thing,” Cal croaks out, putting a hand to his throat. He smiles again, but it’s not pretty this time. Instead, I imagine it’s as sharp as the garotte that was wrapped around his scarred neck.

“Mostly,” I say, one arm banded across my midsection. “They pissed me off. Get me another hot water bottle, some more ibuprofen, and a laptop. Let’s plan our next move.”

CHAPTER

S E V E N

My declaration sounds cool as fuck, but I barely make it twenty minutes before I'm passed out in the master bedroom, waking up to sweet sunshine falling across my face. Blinking awake, I find that I'm alone in the room. There's a small bloodstain where I was lying, but if that's all there is, then the bleeding must've slowed down substantially during the night.

With a groan, I drag myself out of bed, wobbling slightly on my feet.

The boys all look at me as I pad out, blinking away sleep and finding Cal sitting up on one of the sofas. He looks substantially less ashen and waxy than he did yesterday. I point at him and he raises a blond brow.

"You're going to the hospital today—no exceptions."

"Well, good morning to you, too," he replies in a husky voice, hands wrapped around a mug of either coffee or tea, I'm not sure. Aaron watches me from behind the peninsula, making pancakes while Hael sits on one of the stools, an observer instead of a chef today. Vic and Oscar are, as usual, at the table, plotting.

"Being cute won't save you either," I tell him, heading up the stairs for another rinse, another cup change. When I head back down, I settle on the couch opposite Callum and accept the pampering that the boys so clearly want to give me.

And, for the first time since I kissed Vic on his front lawn and sealed the deal with Havoc, I'm asking questions that I should've asked all along: *how*

many people are in our crew? what sort of weapons do we have? how much money can we spend? do we have any informants?

“There’s no way we can deal with the GMP head-to-head,” Vic is telling me, sitting in the chair on my right. I’m lying on the couch where Oscar and I fucked for the first time, the old bloodstains—from both me and Aaron—scrubbed up and covered with a blanket. I might very well add to them today. Definitely time for a new couch. That is, if we don’t die in a gang war first.

“Head,” Hael says, bringing over a cup of tea and a plate of cookies and setting them on the coffee table in front of me. His eyes meet mine as he crouches down in front of me. “Zombie.” He makes a line across the front of his throat. “We need to get rid of Maxwell. That’s how we do it. There’s always infighting during a power shift; the GMP will turn its attentions inward.”

“You’re right, but,” I start, lifting up one of the cookies. They’re a bit odd looking, like discs of fudge or something. “What the fuck is this?”

“*Ma mère les a fait pour toi,*” Hael tells me, and I raise an eyebrow. He smiles, reaching out his *HAVOC* tatted hand to cup the side of my face. His skin is warm, and I swear that I can smell the sweet scent of coconuts. “Those are pralines, Blackbird,” he continues with a laugh, standing up and putting his hands on his hips. “My mom made them for you. I ... maybe told her about the miscarriage.” He shrugs his shoulders loosely, but he doesn’t need to explain. He can tell whoever he wants. Before I fell asleep last night, he kissed me like he was drowning, and then tore himself away so he could head home and comfort his mom. She was hysterical—understandably—because of the shooting.

The whole of Prescott is hysterical.

And I swear to fucking god, it’s like every pair of eyes in this city are on us.

You let enemies into our turf; you let them hurt our kids. What are you going to do about that?

The only thing I can promise is that we aren’t going to let it slide.

Prescott High belongs to Havoc.

“A praline is made with sugar, cream, and nuts.” Hael lets a cocky smile slide into place and gives me an exaggerated wink. “We all know how much you love nuts. You’ve got ten delicious nuts just waiting around for an invitation.”

“She’s bleeding everywhere, fuck off,” Aaron growls at him, but I just smile. I smile because I like them both, even though they couldn’t be anymore different. Hael wants to laugh and play away the pain because it’s what he’s used to; it’s what makes him feel better. Aaron wants to coddle and protect me. I’m okay with both.

I take a bite of a praline and give Hael a thumbs-up.

“Okay, so we take out Maxwell Barrasso. How?” I scroll through a bunch of documents on Oscar’s iPad. He’s actually letting me touch it. If that isn’t love, I don’t know what is. Honestly, I’m not certain I shouldn’t be madly jealous of the goddamn thing. He’d probably fuck it on its period, too. You know, if iPads had menstrual flows. “His house looks like a military fortress.”

“It *is* a military fortress,” Oscar says, sitting across from me on the other sofa as Aaron drops a plate of pancakes on the table in front of me. Callum watches us, smoking a joint and looking like death warmed-over. His hand shakes as he lifts it to his pretty, pink lips, but I’m fairly certain it’s from fatigue and pain rather than fear or stress. That’s just not how Mr. Park rolls. “Electric fences, security cameras, guards, dogs.” Oscar shrugs one, elegant shoulder. The effect of his aristocratic evil isn’t lessened by the fact that he’s shirtless and wearing only ink on his top half. His sweats are threadbare and ratchet, an old pair of gym pants from Prescott High. I think—although this is Oscar so who the fuck knows—that he wore them out of nostalgia.

“Don’t forget about Mason,” Aaron adds, arms crossed over his chest. His gaze has barely left me since he found out about the ... miscarriage. What a strange word, isn’t it? I’m having trouble registering what, exactly, that means. The only thing I know is that I don’t want a baby yet. I figure if I can’t legally buy a bottle of vodka then I don’t want a kid. Besides, if I can hold out at least one more year, I’ll be the oldest mother on Pamela’s side of the family.

What can I say? Prescott blood runs thick and hot. We just can’t help ourselves.

“Mason Miller,” I start slowly, because I haven’t heard much about the guy. I look over at Callum and find him watching me with eyes the color of sorrow and melancholy. He’s always said that if someone in Havoc had to die, it would be him. Part of me wonders if he’s even really here or if I’m imagining his ghost the way I did Kali’s.

I wonder if she knew how far into this she was? Like, she clearly knew about the GMP being at the after-party, but what else? How deep was she? I guess, like with Penelope's suicide, we'll never really know. Then again, I could be wrong about at least one of those things ...

"He's notoriously loyal to Maxwell," Aaron says as he glances over at Vic, as if for confirmation. A very subtle, slow nod from our leader and Aaron turns back to look at me, his eyes shadowed in the early morning light. The sun has just begun to peek its head above the horizon, but the air outside is as cold as ice. I keep checking the time, so I can call Heather as soon as she's awake. I texted her new phone—Oscar had them ready for when we took the girls to Oak River Elementary—but I haven't responded to her reply just yet. I want to hear her voice so bad that I ache. "If we take Maxwell down, he'll come for us all the same."

"Tell me: do either Maxwell or Mason like call girls?" I wonder aloud, thinking about Stacey's face that day in the cafeteria. I can't get it out of my mind. I know we were wrapped up in our own shit, but I can't help feeling like we let her down. She was Prescott High incarnate, our queen bee, Havoc's ally.

She deserves justice, and I intend to wreak some havoc on my quest to get it.

"Oh, Mason is nefarious for his treatment of prostitutes. He's gotten so bad that his boss forbade him from using any of their girls. Now, he just kidnaps women, uses them, and dumps their bodies." Oscar taps his long fingers on the arm of the sofa. I hear he retrieved a hidden precision rifle from under a liner of an outdoor trash can and set up to snipe GMP fuckers from the roof.

I honestly have no words to describe how I feel about that.

Another cramp rips through me, and I groan, pressing the hot water bottle into my belly. The boys all turn their attention to me, but I ignore them. We have shit to do and likely not a lot of time to do it in.

"What about his house?" I ask, but Vic is already shaking his head, his black eyes on me, his fingers pressing just a bit too hard into the arm of the couch.

"Same deal," Vic says succinctly, his voice this primal growl that just barely passes for human. Demonic, is how I'd probably describe it if I were scribbling down one of my shitty poems. I remember once when Kali dug one of them out of the trash and tried to claim that I'd sent her hate mail.

What a crock of shit. That bitch really thought she ranked high on my radar, huh? I had better shit to do in tenth grade. You know, like mourn my dead sister, worry about whether Heather was going to be molested by the Thing, or keep myself alive in the face of Havoc's wrath.

Like I said: liar, thief, coward. Good fucking riddance.

"Same deal," I repeat slowly, looking over at Victor and watching as the edge of his cruel mouth turns up in the slightest smile. For as long as I live, I will never forget the weight of that crown on my head or the words he said to me in those final few moments before the cops stormed the building. "*I told you not to worry about being queen.*"

So I guess I won't. Worry, that is.

Nah, I'll just act like royalty until it fucking sticks.

The way Vic is looking at me, I know he's waiting to see what I'll come up with, what ideas I have. This is what he's wanted all along, for me to stand beside him, a true Havoc Girl. Now that I can see his true intentions, it isn't hard to imagine why he was so pissed at me when I suggested 'performing my duties' or being '*Havoc's girl*'. He wanted a partner, not just a plaything.

"I hate to take the risk, but what if we use one of Stacey's girls to get Mason to a known location? I'm sure he'll have security with him, but it'll be much less than if we try to raid his or Maxwell's places." I flip the cover on the iPad shut and set it aside, going for the tea instead.

Hah. Tea. Like anybody in this house ever drinks tea besides Oscar. You should've seen that motherfucker's face when Hael tried to put a cup of tap water into the microwave. I thought he might whip out his revolver and blow his friend's head clean off. I've never heard someone say something as inane as "*there's a kettle in the cupboard*" and have it sound like "*I'm going to fucking murder you.*" Impressive, I must say.

The taste of this particular tea—one of Oscar's choices, obviously—is deep and earthy, like wet leaves on a warm summer morning after a rain. And there I go again with the metaphors and shit. I can't help it. Language is just too much fun to play with.

"Special order Makaibari Estate green tea," Oscar explains, as if his glasses give him enough focus to read my mind. It feels like he could, like he could read my heart, my mind, and my soul with a single glance. I meet his gaze and take another sip. Briefly, I wonder if the pregnancy I just lost could've been his. Really, it could've been any of them. That's what you get when you

let your five boyfriends run a train on you, am I right?

“He’ll want the girl to come to him,” Vic says finally, as if he’s been mulling my words over in the ensuing silence. “Although, considering his reputation, it’s possible that he’d venture out after fresh prey. Question is: how do we get him to hire one of Stacey’s girls after the whole robbery fiasco?” Vic pauses and clenches his jaw, grinding his teeth in frustration for a moment.

“Well, first off, I think we should officially bring Stacey’s girls into Havoc.” I look at Oscar and, finally, after about ten seconds of dead silence, he nods his chin almost imperceptibly. “We get one of them to talk to Maxwell, to apologize for the oversight of what they did to that John. Then, we have her offer up a girl but on the condition that Mason meets her somewhere public, like a hotel. If they refuse the gift, so what? They’re already after blood. If not, that gives us a chance to deal with him.”

“I’ll kill him,” Cal offers, lifting up his joint in solidarity with the plan. “Just give me a vent or an accessible exterior window.” He takes another drag and then reaches out to grab the ash tray off the coffee table.

“You need to rest,” I tell him when he glances back up at me, wearing a fresh black hoodie that hides all his wounds from prying eyes. “Somebody else can do it. We’re all capable of getting blood on our hands.” I pause for a moment, that old, familiar anxiety rushing through me. But Kali’s ghost doesn’t appear, and I don’t summon her. I don’t need that shit in my life. I need to move forward, and there’s only one way to do that: down the rockiest fucking path possible.

Because nothing worth having is ever easy to get.

“Oh, come on, Bernie,” Cal says with a dark chuckle, cringing slightly and putting his fingers to his throat. I can only imagine what it’d be like to have a garrote wrapped around your neck—especially one made of piano wire. Without those whip-fast dancer reactions of his, I doubt he’d have been able to escape. “You know there’s no rest for the wicked; I need to redeem myself.”

I give him a look, but I don’t plan on letting him out of my sight until he’s had a few days of downtime—and a hospital visit. Like, I’m not done harping on that shit. Fucker needs antibiotics whether he likes it or not.

“Whatever the details,” I say, exhaling and closing my eyes as another cramp rips through me like a slash to the belly. I swear, I can feel my insides

tumbling out onto the floor. When I open my eyes, they're all looking at me again. "We have one thing the GMP doesn't. That is, *us*. We have hot, angry Prescott blood. That has to account for something."

"For now, we need to move," Vic says, mumbling around a cigarette that's clenched between his teeth. "To the safe house. The feds are an okay deterrent, but we killed Maxwell's son. He's coming for us, sooner or later. It's inevitable."

Vic stands up and moves over to the front window, throwing open the drapes to reveal the cop car parked across the street. I glance over my shoulder to watch him.

"It isn't difficult to listen in on a conversation with the right technology. Shit, you can buy that crap on Amazon now." Vic tilts his head to one side, like an animal on the hunt. "I wonder exactly how interested in us the VGTF is."

"Sara really came at me," I say, thinking of the plea deal. Just the idea of it makes my stomach hurt. I should tell the boys; I'm just trying to figure out how to word it, so they don't decide to get all stabby on Sara Young. "Pretty sure she knows we aren't 'just high school kids' now," I say with a long sigh. *Remember what Nora Roberts said: some of the balls you're juggling are made of plastic, the others glass. Drop what you need to drop, Bernie.*

"Bernadette," Victor begins, a warning in his voice. "Your mother is here."

A sharp, hot anger overtakes me as I exhale. I put the water bottle aside and stand up with a groan. There's no blood on my thighs this time, so I guess I was right that the bleeding seems to be slowing. According to Google, early miscarriages sometimes only result in a few hours of heavy bleeding. It's been, what, a day for me? I'm almost through this hurdle, yet another one I can check off my list of accomplishments. *Survive beating on front lawn of high school, survive ensuing miscarriage.*

"Let me deal with her," I say, but all of the boys are standing now. I turn and sweep a narrowed-eyed gaze across them. Maybe I'm bleeding like hell from my vagina and cramping so bad I want to scream, but that's what I do best: persevere. "I've got this. Seriously. Do *not* fucking intervene."

I head for the door and open it, but not before Oscar puts a hand on my shoulder.

"Let me check for snipers," he says, which is legit one of the weirdest and most romantic things any guy has ever said to me. He slips past me, and even

though I don't see any weapons on him, I just know he's got one there somewhere.

Pamela is already halfway across the lawn when Oscar gives me the all clear.

I step out onto the porch and lean my shoulder against the exterior wall of the garage. Well, what used to be a garage. More like a dedicated grow room now. In typical Prescott fashion, Pam comes at me with violence brimming in her red-painted fingernails. She'd love nothing more than to dig them into my arm or slap me across the face, but I guess Oscar's presence—or the police across the street—give her pause.

Guess she's not as stupid as I once thought.

"Where is my daughter?" she demands, dressed in a white blouse that looks more suited to a country club than to the southside. I wonder if she stole this one or purchased it with one of the credit cards she 'borrows' off of her rich friends. Pamela Pence is nothing but a world class manipulator. I've known lots of those—Kali, Coraleigh, Neil, etc.—but Pam has always had a certain level of finesse that they didn't have. She's much better at not getting caught.

"I'm standing right in front of you," I tell her, and then I lick my lower lip. It tastes like caustic biting remarks and bullshit, acid and fucked-up lies. I cannot stop the next words that fall from my mouth. It's as if they've been summoned by some dark goddess just to incite drama. "Or were you referring to the one you let your husband rape on the regular?"

Pamela's mouth thins into a line, but she doesn't react, not the way I so desperately wish she would.

"Where is Heather?" she snaps, and I smile.

Heather.

I won't let anyone use her or hurt her, not for any reason.

"Out of your reach," I say, crossing my arms over my chest. I've got on an old t-shirt that has the face of some hideous guy on the front with the word *NOPE!* slashed over his eyes. I can't remember if he was just a racist, sexist reality TV host or if he was like, a senator or something. He might even have been president, but shit if I can remember. I think the shirt used to be Pen's, but it was in the duffel bag full of clothes I packed when I stopped by the house with Cal. I don't remember packing it, but I'm damn sure glad to have it. "Why? Are you worried about her?"

“I told you that you’d regret pissing me off,” Pamela warns me, shaking her head. “And now Neil is *dead* because of you.” I cock a brow. This is the perfect opportunity to test out my bullshitting skills. They’ve been honed to a fine point living in Prescott; I expect nothing less than perfection from myself.

“Because of me? No, he was working for some white supremacist gang from Portland. Likely, that’s what got him.” I pause as Pam stares me down with matching emerald eyes. Why do we have to share the same eyes, me and her? The same skin color. The same shade of ashy white blonde hair (when hers isn’t overly processed, that is). It isn’t fair, for us to look so alike. If I share so many of her physical traits, is some of her ugliness in my DNA as well? “You didn’t ... kill him yourself, did you?” I hazard and Pamela’s nostrils flare wide, the sickly-sweet scent of her perfume making me feel dizzy. Or maybe that’s the blood loss? I have no idea. I put a hand on the wall to steady myself.

“What the fuck are you playing at, little girl?” Pamela asks me, and I swear to fuck, I have to have a PTSD attack right then and there. *Little girl, little girl, little girl.*

“You sit your ass in here and think about what you’ve done, little girl.” Pamela’s nails are digging into my arm so hard that blood runs hot and wet down to my elbow, drip, drip, dripping to the floor. She shoves me into the bathroom so hard that I stumble, smacking my chin on the edge of the bathtub as tears run down my face like rivers. There’s something smelly in the bathtub, something that reeks of bleach.

“Mom, I’m sorry!” I wail, pushing up to my feet and trying to get to the door before she slams it in my face and locks it from the outside. I didn’t realize until I was much older how weird it is to have a lock on the outside of a bathroom door. “Mom, please!”

I didn’t mean to spill the orange juice. Pen stuck French fries in her nose, and I laughed so hard that I bumped it with my foot. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t mean to ...

I shake my head and reach my fingers up to my temple. Oscar waits at the edge of the driveway, his eyes as sharp as daggers. Our eyes meet, but only for a second. Then Pamela is slapping me across the face as hot blood begins to run down my legs. I’ve overfilled my cup. Again.

Scratch what I said about the bleeding slowing down. Too optimistic too

soon, I guess.

I feel dizzy.

I put my hand to my cheek, but I don't retaliate. I don't need to.

"I know you were upset when you saw that video of Neil raping Penelope. Any mother would be. In fact, I don't blame you for doing what you did—"

Pamela is on me like white on rice. That's white trash, southside shit for you. One time, her best friend went to a Halloween party without her. You should've *seen* how my mother blew up. "*I will ruin that cunt! I. will. RUIN. her!*" She ripped the woman's earrings out and hit her so hard in the face that she gave her a blowout fracture.

Neil and his family got my mom out of facing any charges. Unsurprising.

Pam grabs my hair and yanks me toward the grass, and I let her. I could fight back and kick her ass. If I wanted to.

"Don't touch her!" I yell at the boys, because I *need* them to show restraint right now. "She won't hurt me, not really." Pamela throws me into the grass, bleeding and shaking. But not because of her. *Fuck*. My fight or flight instinct is blazing so hot, I wouldn't be surprised to stand up and see a burnt swatch in the grass beneath me. "Mom, please!"

Shit.

And now I'm triggering my own PTSD.

Mom, please. Please don't lock me in the bathroom with a tub full of bleach. Please don't hit me when I sneeze too loud or cough too hard. Please don't laugh at me when I throw up on the rug in front of all of Neil's awful friends. Please, please, please.

Be a mom.

Only ... she isn't. She never really was. Because being a mother isn't just about pushing a human out of your vagina. It's a state of fucking mind. It's about caring for someone more than you care for yourself. Aaron is a better mother to his sister and cousin than Pamela ever was to me.

She gets on top of me, and I won't lie: it hurts. She straddles me, one hand gripping my hair and yanking so hard that white fire explodes behind my eyelids. I guess I learned how to fight from watching her. I suppose we are similar in some ways, me and Pamela.

As I'm lying there underneath her, aching and hurting and bleeding, I realize that she was probably a victim of the system, too. My father was nearly fifteen years her senior. He was married. He got her pregnant at

sixteen. As fond as my memories of him are, wasn't he in the wrong?

The thing is: once you cross that line from victim to perpetrator, there is no absolution. You should *know* how much the atrocities you suffered hurt. How dare you perpetuate that cycle. How *dare you*.

But I let Pam beat my ass while my boys wait, gnashing teeth and foaming at the mouth.

From the corner of my eye, I can see them. Shit, I can *feel* them. Seeing me on the ground like this, beneath number seven on my list, must just kill them. If I were one of the boys right now, I'd probably defy my queen's order and come out swinging.

Victor is standing there like a statue, stone-still, his control absolute. It's what I see in his eyes that terrifies me, all the awful, awful things he'd do to Pam if given the chance. Aaron has his left hand balled into a fist, leaning against the doorjamb like he can't bear to stand up. Hael is pacing, raking his fingers through his bloodred hair, while Callum crouches on the walk just in front of Aaron.

It's Oscar, stoic, immovable Oscar, who looks like he might actually come for my mother. The only thing that stops him as he starts forward is a swift look from Victor, one that demands perfect obedience.

"Pamela Pence!" a voice calls out, and then my mother is being hauled off of me. She's screaming at me, but I can't hear a word she's saying. I think I've learned over the years how to filter out her toxicity. I roll over in the grass and push myself up to my knees.

That's how I'm going to win this war.

Cramping from a miscarriage and shaking from old hurts and raw anger.

I glance back to see Sara Young, Detective Constantine, and the uniformed officers from the squad car across the street.

Bingo, bitch.

"Are you okay?" Sara asks as Oscar moves over to stand beside her, his face so pinched you'd think he just swallowed a fucking lemon. Police Girl is crouched down next to me, one hand on my shoulder, but her eyes are on the blood between my legs. "We need to get you to a hospital."

"The GMP did this to me," I whisper back at her, and I don't have to fake the way my voice quavers. I'm furious. At Pamela. At Ophelia. At this gang war. At the entire world. Justice is never meted out the way it should. I don't believe in karma or otherworldly punishments. Only I can carve out my

pound of flesh. “They took the choice away from me.”

Because that’s what I believe in: choice. My body, my choice. And they fucking took that from me. I shove up to my feet and stumble into Oscar. He catches me easily, and then holds me much closer and much tighter than I expected.

“It’s just a bad period, she’ll be fine,” Oscar says smoothly as I close my eyes and lean into him. “What are you going to do with Pamela?”

“Well, first off, I’m going to add assault and battery to her list of charges.” Sara pauses, and I glance over to find her expression bewildered. I’ve managed to confuse her. Again. She has no idea what to think of me.

See, look, my boys didn’t react to that violence. They are stable. They don’t hurt people just for hurting me.

“She killed Neil, didn’t she?” I ask, my voice grim as I try to stand up. Oscar won’t let me go, however. Instead, he keeps me clutched in his inked arms like I’ll drown if he doesn’t keep me afloat.

“I can’t speak on an open case,” Sara says, but there’s a strange lilt to her voice that tells me all that I need to know. “Bernadette, I’d like to speak with you again. I’m afraid you’re not safe here. The Grand Murder Party isn’t another high school gang to trade insults with. They’ve wiped out their entire crew here in Springfield.”

My eyes widen slightly. Don’t have to fake that one. *Well, shit, that helps explain the shooting. Kill Stacey and her girls for the robbery. Get rid of the rest of the Charter Crew so there’s nobody left to squeal. Destroy Havoc.*

Only ... I once described Havoc as a five-headed hydra. You cannot destroy something that is legendary.

“We’re going to move to a safe house,” I tell her, pushing away from Oscar and then throwing my arms around the detective. It’s a risky move. The cops in South Prescott have been known to shoot you for less. But I go for it and then whisper in her ear. “I’ll send you the address; I’m afraid, Sara.”

I let go of her and sniffle, cringing as I look down and realize how much I’m bleeding. I need to get inside, clean up, empty my cup. This is annoying to me already.

“You need to see a doctor, Bernadette,” Sara stresses, flicking her eyes to Oscar and then past him, toward the house. All of the boys are waiting outside—even Callum. As soon as she sees him, Sara’s face tightens. “I see

you've found Mr. Park."

"They tried to kill him," I tell her, and this time, I don't have to glance back at Vic or Oscar to figure out what I'm supposed to be saying. I'm queen here. I live and breathe south Prescott. Havoc is *mine*. I know what I'm doing. "He ran and hid. One guy had a garrote."

Sara's nostrils flare as she notices the scabbed-over gash on Cal's neck.

"That would be Russ Bauer," she says, and I'm not sure why she's telling me this or if she's even supposed to say as much. "He's an enforcer for the Grand Murder Party. Bernadette, if they're sending him after you then you really are in danger. You should be in protective custody."

"We handle our own in the southside, police girl," Oscar says, his tone dismissive and cold. "Why don't you do your job, and we'll do ours?"

"Which is what? Playing at being gangbangers? I don't think you understand what you're up against," Sara says, her cool façade cracking around the edges. She's wearing black pants and a very familiar looking blue jacket. Bet ya it says *FBI* in yellow on the back.

"Did you see the carnage at Prescott High?" I ask, shaking my head. "It's not a crime to defend ourselves which we *will* do if pushed."

Sara just stares at me like I'm a puzzle she's desperate to put together. She wants to understand me, but she can't. We're from different worlds. Doesn't mean we have to be enemies. We want the same thing: for the bad guys to be punished.

"There must be a reason you and your partner were hanging around here," Oscar deadpans, turning his attention over to Detective Constantine. Shit, I have no idea why I keep calling him 'detective'. He's obviously with the VGTF as well. I think about when we first met, and he was questioning me over Danny Ensbrook. Because of the GMP.

The FBI thinks the GMP took out the entire Charter Crew.

This could be a good turn of luck for us.

"We're expecting the GMP to hit you hard-and-fast," Sara explains, glancing over at the squad car with Pamela in the back seat. Nailing her for Neil's murder ... That's such a Havoc move right there. What was it that Victor said to me at the boutique? "*Poetic justice, personal choice, and wrongs made right.*"

Perfection.

"We could protect you, Bernadette. All of you. If you wanted," she

continues when I don't respond to her previous statement. She's grooming me to be a snitch. Baiting me. I refuse to rise to the occasion, staring wordlessly back at her until she shakes her head and turns toward Callum instead. "Mr. Park, a word?" she asks, and he complies, moving over to speak to her on the driveway.

Me? I barely make it into the house before my head starts to spin and I get so dizzy that I can't find my feet.

Surprisingly, it's Oscar motherfucking Montauk who picks me up and carries me upstairs to the shower.

"You are in so much fucking trouble for making me watch that," Vic growls out as we pass by, but I know he doesn't mean it. I killed that. Pamela is in custody. Sara knows the GMP caused my miscarriage.

Oscar is ... being nice?

We might just win this after all.

Stranger things have obviously happened.

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CHAPTER

EIGHT

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Oscar Montauk

I put Bernadette in the bathtub and then crouch down beside it, laying my forearms along the side and resting my chin atop them. On the outside, I'm nothing if not calm, stoic even. On the inside, I'm shattering and cracking into a million tiny splinters. And every single one of them is aimed at the heart of the GMP.

How dare they do this to her, of all people ... How dare they?! HOW FUCKING DARE THEY?!

"Penny for your thoughts," Bernadette asks as I blink at her, still unmoving, my muscles locked and tense. God help the first person to cross me that isn't family.

"Are you upset?" I ask, my voice like a stone wall. Why anyone would want to breach it is beyond me. But ... I've said it before myself: *blood in, blood out*. There are certain things that cannot be undone.

Especially this, Oscar Montauk, you fool. Especially this.

My left hand twitches with the need to touch the side of her face, but I can't quite seem to get myself to move. Maybe I'm afraid that if that happens, I won't be able to control myself. What if my fingertips brush her soft face and I feel her sadness swirl through me like a storm? Then I'll take as many guns as I can carry and do something that we'll all regret.

My control is not absolute. *You should ask fucking Victor for advice.*

I pinch my mouth, and it occurs to me that Bernadette cannot read my goddamn thoughts. I scowl and spit and sneer, and that's all she sees. She doesn't know what goes on inside, how fucking conflicted I am. How twisted.

"Upset?" Bernie asks, taking off her grass-stained shirt with some long-gone fascist that used to be president on it. I abhor politics, one of the few remaining facets of modern-day life where common sense means nothing. The whole world is stupid as far as I'm concerned. All I want is this, me and Bernadette Savannah Blackbird and an eternity of quietly whispered things, fingertips tracing flesh, and sweet mouths. "About what?"

Her bloodied shorts come off next. She tosses them at me, and I catch them. Glancing down, I see ruby red color staining my fingertips. When I lift my gaze up, I see her scoot forward and turn the shower on, letting the hot

water run over her as she sits naked in the bathtub.

It's a moment like before, when she was on the toilet last night telling us about the pregnancy. I did nothing then. How could I? I have no idea *what* to do or how to behave in these sorts of situations. For fuck's sake, my mother used to dye my hair as a child so that her husband wouldn't suspect I wasn't his biological kid; I've never stopped. Clearly, I have issues. More than anyone else in this fucked-up little family I'd imagine.

I raise a single brow. It's the most expression I usually show that isn't somehow related to disdain, carnal delight, or sarcasm.

"Don't make me state the obvious," I purr back, turning away so Bernadette can clean and reinsert her menstrual cup. She doesn't seem to give a shit that I'm in here, watching with eyes that have already seen too much. My father might not have been the biological contributor to my DNA, but he certainly left his mark on me. He molded me into the monster I am, right at about the same time he put his gun to his temple and took his own life.

Sometimes, I swear to god I can hear the sound of his body hitting the ground. *Thump*. Over and over and over. *Thump, thump, thump*. I blink again and force my lips to smile. Bernadette is just staring right back at me, like she's waiting for something.

"The miscarriage." I start with that because it's the most obvious and most pressing point. But what about the rest of it? What about the way her face changed before Pamela slapped her? What about the way her hands shook? "Your mother. How do you feel about that?"

"Do you think we can talk freely in here? Because I have theories about the GMP." Bernie grabs that damned peach soap of hers and my hand snaps out, long, inked fingers curling around her wrist. It's such a strange sight, to see my hand touching someone else's skin. I can feel her pulse thundering in my hand, and I rub my thumb along the dancing heat of it.

A small, sharp gasp escapes Bernie's throat, and I close my eyes in pleasure. When I bring her wrist to my mouth, she lets me take it. Carefully, gently, I uncurl some of my fingers, exposing an inked portion of her wrist.

There's a small book tattooed here with a quill pin twirling above it. My mouth curves up sharply at one side. *Ah, the clichéd tattoo of a dreamer*. Nothing has ever looked so beautiful to me before. The thing with dreamers like this, they sometimes get the silly idea that they're ordinary.

In reality, I'm drawn to this girl as a shooting star is drawn across the sky.

Some things cannot be undone.

This is one of them.

“*Take, O take those lips away,*” I whisper, kissing her pulse again. She tries to draw her arm away and my fingers wrap tight again, nails digging into her flesh. “*That so sweetly were forsworn.*”

“I think I care more for the miniscule cluster of cells I just lost than my mother ever did for me.” Bernadette stops talking and this time, when she tries to pull her arm away, I let her. I stand up. That old, familiar panic surges through me, but I tamp down on it; Bernadette is more important than any fear or hesitation that I might feel.

Four months ago, if we’d been here, doing this, I would’ve walked away, left her in here to cry. Or worse: not cry. Because emotions that stick around inside of you for too long, they rot. Trust me, I know better than anyone.

Two years ago, if we’d been here, doing this, I would’ve whispered awful things in her ear and I would’ve delighted in seeing her face darken with anger. Because that meant this strange hold we have on one another, this attraction that never goes away, that it could be broken somehow. Or at the very least, stretched. She might’ve walked away and known a life of ignorance and bliss.

But this ... it’s nothing but passion and poison.

I reach over my shoulder and grab a fistful of my shirt, lifting it over my head and tossing it aside. I reach my right hand back and flick off the lights. Every movement that I make hurts; there is no part of me that isn’t terrified right now. Yet, I’ve been letting this one fear above all others consume me, and I can’t let it do that anymore. Not when Bernadette needs me the way she does.

“What are you doing?” Bernie asks as I strip off my pants and step into the tub, sliding my naked body around hers. I’ve always wondered what the point of these oversized tubs was. Now I know. “Oscar ...” she starts, reaching down and curling her fingers through mine. I hiss at the sensation, but I don’t pull away. The heat of her is *incinerating*.

“I have no idea,” I say, my lips pressed against the side of her neck. There’s a hickey there. I stare at the shape of it and imagine that it feels familiar. I left that there. I lift my eyes up to the faucet as it drips into the tub. She’s finally put the plug in, and it’s filling with water that feels lukewarm in comparison to her skin. “This is all new to me. You seem to be okay with it

though. Why don't you tell me?"

She stays where she is for a minute and then leans back into me.

After a minute, I swear I can feel her smiling. I can certainly hear it when she speaks.

"And those eyes, the break of day," she murmurs, the peach soap floating in the tub and bumping up against my hand as it stays banded across her belly. *"Lights that do mislead the morn."*

My own mouth tilts into an uncomfortable sort of smile.

We should not be smiling.

Our school was shot up.

This girl is suffering.

We could very well die before we graduate.

It's something that I've always feared. In that moment, I swear I can feel it, this pall that falls over us both like the shadow of something morbid creeping its way in. My eyes close and I squeeze her even tighter.

That's why I'm smiling.

Because you'll only know true regret when it's too late. I want to smile now, just in case. Just in case one of us doesn't make it out of this. Just in case neither of us does.

"Do you think broken people fit together just right sometimes?" she asks absently, her hair tickling my bare chest. My cock is rock-solid, but that's mostly irritating to me. I can't help the blood that rushes to it every time I see Bernadette, but now is definitely not the time. She needs rest and respect, not a man with so little self-control that he was afraid to fuck because he might kill. "Like, their jagged edges fit together so they don't feel so broken anymore?"

I pause, listening to her swirl her finger in the water.

"At least when I'm with you, I don't crave death the way I do when I'm alone." I stroke my fingers gently down her belly, wondering absently what I would think if she were still pregnant. Mostly, I think, I would feel sorry for her. Because she doesn't want a baby. She shouldn't want any of us. But she's got us. And I, I would be inappropriately thrilled, almost to the point of being obscene. It's why I always ask about it. Because I want to know. Because I'm desperate to do something awful and embrace my selfishness. Only I don't. Not to Bernadette. "You don't deserve the burden, but there it is. I'll try my best to lighten the load."

“It doesn’t feel like a burden to me.” Bernadette lifts my hand to her lips and kisses my wet knuckles. I shudder, my skin prickling with goose bumps, but that delicious heat swirls through me and I close my eyes again, savoring the feel of it.

“Then you have stronger shoulders than most.” I lift my hand up and cup her chin, using the feel of her to see when my eyes can make out only the deepest shadows of the bathroom. My mouth finds hers easily, even in the pitch-black. It may as well be drawn there. I couldn’t be anymore enamored than if I’d been summoned, an awful demon from the ugliest depths of the world. And here I am, in all my hideous glory. “*But my kisses bring again,*” I whisper against her mouth, pushing her face back just a bit when she tries to kiss me. “*Bring again—*” I move our lips together but only enough to burn; there’s no relief in that kiss. It just turns our desperation for one another up to dangerous levels. “*Seals of love, but seal’d in vain.*” Another sweetly agonizing brush of lips. It almost hurts now. I’m trembling. “*Seal’d in vain.*”

I kiss her again, letting my tongue delve deep, my fingers tighten on her chin. She makes a noise that’s caught somewhere between pleasure and pain. I’m kissing her just right, but I’m holding her too hard. And I can’t seem to make myself stop.

After a moment, I pull back and simultaneously release her so roughly that she cries out. I stand up out of the bath and step onto the mat, dripping water everywhere. *You’re being too subtle, Oscar. She can’t read your mind, remember? Be a fucking man and spell it out so that she’ll know, so that she’ll always understand the truth behind everything you do.*

“All I mean to say, Bernadette,” I begin, and I know that if I hesitate too long in here, I won’t be able to control myself. *The GMP beat the baby out of my mate.* My jaw clenches and my hands curl into fists, nails digging bloody crescents into my palm. “Is that I’m in love with you.” I pause, finding that I’ve abruptly stopped breathing. It takes me a moment to remember how, and I let out a long, deep exhale. “Desperately so.”

I step into the hallway and slam the bathroom door behind me.

CHAPTER

NINE

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Bernadette Blackbird

I end up sitting on the edge of Aaron's bed, a hot water bottle pressed against my belly, hands trembling as I look through the pictures that the boys saved for me. My eyes are so wet that I could cure drought, chase away the harsh sands and welcome fresh green growth from the earth.

"Penelope," I whisper, fingers holding aloft a picture of me, Pen, Pam, and our father. The weirdest part about this picture is that we're all still smiling in it—even Pam. When did she come to hate us? It doesn't feel like she did before, but maybe it was the money that made her happy, softened her sharper edges.

I stand up, clutching my hot water bottle and groaning. I'm wearing my own panties today, my own shirt. I just wanted to wear my own things for a minute. I just wanted to be alone for two. "*I'm in love with you. Desperately so.*"

Why did Oscar have to tell me he loves me in a way that sounds so similar to the word *goodbye*? Because that's all I heard when he said that to me: *I love you so much but goodbye*. He's worried about us and the GMP, the VGTF, the world. He isn't as sure as he's always seemed about everything.

I used to think that Havoc was untouchable, but now that I'm on the inside, I can see it.

We are all—as Oscar might say—desperately human.

But it's the inhuman parts of us, all the ugliest, most hideous, most bloodied parts, that will save us in the end.

I kneel down beside Penelope's box and dig furiously through it, pulling out old math assignments, an essay about—of all things—Shakespeare (namely that the fucker was likely a plagiarist of George North), until I find a bunch of pages with thin pink lines printed on the paper. I recognize these pages as coming from her journal.

And these are ones that've been ripped out. Most of them are barely more than fluff. "*I saw the cutest shoes today.*" My throat closes up. "*I saw the prettiest girl today.*" My heart starts to race so hard that I feel dizzy, sitting back hard on my ass. My socked feet scrape across the carpet as I lean forward and put the pages between my legs, so I can drop my head between them to help ward off the feeling of vertigo.

Behind me, on the nightstand, is an empty bowl that was full of beef broth. Aaron brought that to me. I'm being spoiled today. Technically, I'm supposed to be packing for the safe house, but your girl needed a cigarette and a moment.

One does not take a confession of love from Oscar Montauk lightly.

"Pen liked girls," I say, turning the page and finding a rant about Mr. Darkwood that makes me smile. And then frown. I have no idea if he's still alive. I hope so. In fact, if I were a woman of any sort of faith, I'd probably pray for it. I switch the pages again. This one is a bucket list. I can barely stand to look at it.

Is there anything more depressing than unfulfilled potential? And *this* is why I hate rapists. This is why I hate murderers (although, I suppose, I am one myself now). How *dare* you corrupt beautiful souls and act like there's any excuse for it.

The back of the bucket list page is blank, making me wonder if there isn't another page stuck to it. I doubt anyone would notice it, but Penelope *always* wrote on both sides of her notebook paper. I've rarely seen one without *something* scrawled on the back of it: be it a list, a note, a drawing of a sun or a heart or a moon with a face.

I peel the pages apart and find something that I feel like Sara Young may very well want to keep.

"The worst part is the way she talks to me when nobody else is around. She says that I ruined her life. She says that I stole her youth. She tells me all sorts of things that mothers should never whisper to their daughters in the dark.

She wants me dead.

She wants me gone.

She says I took her man.

She says she's going to kill me."

I stand up suddenly, snagging a pair of blue jeans and stuffing the hot water bottle in the front. I don't bother to zip or button them up; they just sort of hang there. But I have better shit to do. I take off, throwing open the bedroom door and heading down the stairs to find Oscar and Vic turning on a pile of new phones.

"Look what we got you, wife," Vic starts, his cigarette hanging from his lips. He pauses when he sees me and then frowns hard as I snatch Aaron's

cordless receiver. Without skipping a beat, I grab a card from beside the phone, one that has Sara's number on it.

With the page clutched in my shaking hand, I call Police Girl up.

"Hello, Bernadette?" she says, almost like it's a question. I assume she's programmed this number into her own phone.

"Why did you arrest my mother?" I whisper, holding that damned page and shaking so hard that I wonder if my skin isn't going to split in half. "It wasn't for assaulting me, was it? And it wasn't for Neil's murder either."

There's a long pause before Sara sighs, like she's had a long debate with herself on what she might tell me if I should ask. But she still thinks she can build trust with me, that she can get me to confide in her.

"Bernadette ... I had your mother arrested on multiple counts. Namely, I'm focused on her connection to Neil and the GMP." There's a long, dangerous pause here. I barely recognize the sound of my own breathing. "But I think what you're asking is, was she arrested on suspicion of murdering your sister?"

Frankly, I'm not sure how to respond to that.

"I left you one page in the box," Sara tells me, and I feel that strange twisting inside my chest. *Like with Ms. Keating*. The part of me that still wants to believe is intrigued. The rest of me thinks we should bury Police Girl six feet deep. "You come to your own conclusions, but you'll hear more once the case progresses. For now, unless she posts bail, your mother is in the jail at the county courthouse."

I hang up before Sara can say anything else.

Glancing down at the page in my hand, I wonder why I didn't just tell the Havoc Boys to put Pam into the coffin with Neil.

"You alright, Mrs. Channing?" Vic asks, coming up behind me and putting his hot hands on my upper arms. As soon as he touches me, my numbness shatters to glass. It hits the floor with a sound like bells as I turn my head back to look at him.

"Sara Young offered me a plea deal," I say, and Vic's hands tighten almost imperceptibly.

"Yeah? What were the terms?"

I turn back around toward him.

"I don't give a fuck what the terms were. I don't work for the cops. I only work for Havoc." I stare back at my husband, the head of heads when it

comes to this five-headed hydra beast that is Havoc. He stares right back at me, and that magnetic pull that both pushes us together and launches us leagues apart, I can feel it and it almost hurts. “Pretty sure she wants me to testify against my mother.”

“For?” Vic asks, glancing over at Oscar. He’s wearing one of his suits again, as polished and perfect as always. He gave me everything and then he panicked. But I was there, and I felt his heart beating against my back. He most certainly has a strong one. I’ll let him act the lead part in his personal plays all he wants when we’re around other people. But alone, I want to see that skeleton masked ripped clean off.

“Murdering my sister for one,” I say, and then I lift up the page from Penelope’s notebook. I release it into Victor’s hand. Our fingers, when they brush, create sparks. He stares at the page for a minute and then looks up at me. *I’m so fucking numb without you, Vic.* “She ... how ...” I pause, and my mind strays back to that night where Penelope stared Pam straight in the eye and told her about the dress. *“I took it, and I sold it.”*

And then the image of her, lying on her bed, wrapped up in blankets ... Pamela’s pills on her nightstand.

Pamela’s pills ...

Pamela’s ...

Victor reaches out and uses two fingers to lift the chain from inside of my shirt, the one with his grandmother’s ring hanging from it. I don’t move; I don’t speak. I just stare into his ebon eyes and let myself fall. He’ll catch me. That much, I know for sure.

He spins the chain around so that he can access the clasp, unhooking it and then taking the ring off. Victor slides it back down my ring finger.

“Pamela and not Neil,” he says, like even he’s surprised by this one. He looks down at the water bottle sticking out of my pants. It’s just an old glass bottle with the label removed, something one of the boys probably dug out of the recycling. But, heat it up under the tap to make sure the glass doesn’t break when you pour in the boiling water, and you’re golden. His eyes lift up to my face. “What do you want us to do?”

Pamela is at the county jail.

On suspicion of murdering my sister.

But the VGTF is investigating the Grand Murder Party.

Neil was involved with the GMP; Pamela likely was, too. She has all those

rich friends, doesn't she? I start to shake. *What if she sold us to the Kushners?* I wonder. What if, all along, she's been a part of this? Woven into the very fabric of my demise.

My throat gets so dry that I can hardly imagine speaking another word.

I let Vic band an arm around me and pull me close, putting his lips against the top of my head.

"What do you need, wife?" he asks, and I can tell his heart is broken. For me, I'll bet. Because I always hurt for him, too. I have since we were kids and I saw his mom stop by the school once—just once in all our years of elementary, junior, and high school combined—and dig her nails into his skin so hard that he bled.

I recognized that pain in him, when he was eight, and I was eight, and our eyes met across the dusty surface of a playground that's already been forgotten in time.

"Do we have any girls in the county jail right now?" I ask absently.

"No," Vic begins cautiously, his thumb brushing across my knuckles and making me shiver. "But we could find one. I bet one of Stacey's girls would know who to contact. What do you want to do?"

I stay where I am for a moment.

I haven't fully processed it yet.

I'm not sure that I can, not right now. Not after yesterday.

"Find out for me. And then I'll give Pam a choice. Admit to what she did or ..." I pause, working my jaw in anger for a moment. My fingers curl around Victor's. "I guess she might find herself hanging from her sheets one morning."

I try to pull away, but Vic tightens his hand on mine. I see Oscar stiffen at the table, like this is a dance we just danced, as if he recognizes all the moves.

"Ophelia called while you were upstairs," Vic tells me, his mouth turning down into a frown. He wants to pursue, nail down my emotions, probably nail me ... But he can't do any of those things, so he settles for letting that feeling travel down his fingers and into my arm. "Sara Young wasn't wrong: the GMP is coming for us."

I stare back at him, and then shake my head.

"But. There's a *but* in there somewhere." I see Oscar watching us, but I'm having trouble meeting his eyes, so I keep my attention on Vic. Another

cramp hits me like a punch to the gut, and I grimace. Victor pulls me close and parks his hands on my hips. I know what he's thinking, a bunch of bullshit like *they killed my baby* or whatever alpha-hole crap goes through that thick skull of his. He keeps it carefully tucked away, but it won't last, that feigned indifference. Eventually, we'll be stripped down and trembling in front of one another, souls bared, hearts naked.

"She wants us to renegotiate with Trinity. If we speed up that process, and guarantee Maxwell a cut of the money, he'll keep his men back for the time being." Vic leans down to put his mouth near my ear. "But guess what? I saved you the trouble of deciding what to do."

"Yeah?" I ask, rubbing my thumb across my wedding ring. I can't look at him right now, reeking of sin and sex, looking like a goddamn demon made of carnal torture and ink. My body hurts too much to feel like this; it isn't fair.

"Well, they already tried to have us executed, didn't they?" Vic smiles at me, all white teeth and bullshit, just the way I like him. His purple-dark hair is smoothed back, his eyes the color of an empty grave, freshly dug and awaiting a body to fall into its shadowy hands. "And it didn't work out so well for them. I told Ophelia to fuck off."

I let out a sharp exhale when something catches my eye.

It's the pamphlet for Oak River Elementary.

It's almost time for my phone call with Heather.

"What's going to happen to Prescott High?" I ask, looking back at Vic. I wonder where Aaron, Hael, and Cal are? After nearly losing Aaron, and coming close to the same with Cal, I'm not letting any of them get more than a hundred feet from me at any given time.

"Indefinitely closed," Oscar says, his voice just this side of genteel. You'd almost think he was having feelings in that crazy head of his.

"What's the district's plan?" I ask, glancing back at Vic. "For you to get your inheritance, you need to graduate. So, what's the deal?"

"I had an idea," Vic says, reaching out and taking the Oak River Elementary pamphlet. He flips it over to the ad for Oak Valley Prep on the opposite side. I lift my gaze up to meet his. "We need a school; I'm allowed to withdraw money from my trust for education."

I just stare back at him like he's a crazy person.

"You're fucking kidding me, right?" I say as he chuckles and pulls away,

still shaking his head. “You’re not saying what I think you’re saying, are you? Our rachet asses at Oak Valley Prep? I’d probably spontaneously combust if I tried to step onto that campus as a student.”

“Desperate times call for desperate motherfucking measures,” Vic says, opening a wooden box on the peninsula and pulling out a cigar. He offers it up to me and I take it in two fingers, staring at it before looking up at him. “You know how men back in the fifties would smoke a cigar when their baby was born?” Vic asks, and I just stare back him. He frowns, and I can tell he’s upset, probably more so than I am. “Just humor me and have a smoke.”

“And Oak Valley Prep?” I reiterate, because the very *idea* of attending that school skeeves me out on so many levels.

“Hey, think about it,” Vic says, clenching the cigar between his teeth and grinning at me. “If we enroll, it’ll be that much easier to kill Trinity Jade.” He lights up, taking a few puffs on his cigar before handing me the lighter.

I stare down at it in my hand for a minute, but I can’t deny him that logic. He has a point.

The safe house is right in the dirtiest, ugliest part of South Prescott. This block is, like, the southside of the southside. The air tastes like desperation and despair, and the wind brings with it the acrid scent of piss and unwashed bodies. Junkies line the stoops, slumped over and broken. The cops don’t ever come here. Or, if they do, it’s not to help anyone.

I grind my teeth slightly, my arm banded across my middle, holding a fresh hot water bottle in place. Having a miscarriage in the middle of the gang war is ... impossible. *Nantucket, Bernadette. You could’ve had Nantucket.* Hah. But really, you can take the girl out of Prescott, but you can’t take the thirsty ho out of the girl.

I never would’ve survived there.

All of this shit, this adrenaline, these dangerous boys that smell like spice and passion, how was I supposed to walk away from this? It’s quite literally in my blood. Violence is in my blood. The need to *win* against an enemy that I can see, smell, and touch. More often than not, our worst enemies are intangible.

Self-doubt. Fear. Ignorance.

Aaron opens the passenger side door, holding out his recently broken hand. It's a little early for his cast to be off, but I can understand why he took it off. Vulnerability hurts, especially if it means you might not be able to help the ones you love the most.

I take his outstretched fingers and let him help me down from the Bronco. Our bodies fall together, and I look up into his green-gold eyes, flecks of color swirling like dancers as cold winter sunshine falls across his face. The air is so crisp that even though I just got out of the warm car, my lips feel frozen and dry as they part in wonder.

How it's possible for Aaron to look like an angel when he wears the ink of the devil, I will never be able to understand.

"One day," he says, wetting his lips and looking up and over my head. I imagine that he's staring into the open door of the Bronco and over to Hael on the driver's side. Aaron tilts his head back to look at me. We don't have to hurry or hide the fact that we're here. The *reason* that we're here is that this is heavy Havoc territory. There are crew members in every building.

This is where we hunker down, deep in the darkness and the filth of our own nest.

Six blocks down, Prescott High sits, surrounded by reporters and filled with cops. Who knows if, after the investigation winds down, if there will even *be* a Prescott High anymore.

"One day?" I query, squeezing my fingers around his. He drops his lips to mine, tasting our shared memories on my mouth. He never wanted anyone but me, and in that desperation, he forgot that he should let himself relax every now and again, let his guard down. He doesn't know how to do that anymore, paint my face with frosting while we laugh until we cry like we did on a Christmas Eve three years ago.

But, as soon as those words leave my lips, I see something shift in his face. His worst fears are coming true, and he has no choice but to face them. In doing that, some of his careful shell cracks around the edges, and he's a seventeen-year-old boy with too many responsibilities all over again.

"One day, we'll either have a baby or we won't. But I want *you* to decide when that is. Not Victor. Or me. Most especially not the GMP ..." He trails off and then lifts a hand up to cup my face. Sandalwood and roses. That familiar scent makes my nostrils flare, and I close my eyes briefly as the wind picks up, ruffling my hair.

Aaron takes my fingers, twisting our hands together. He winces slightly, but he doesn't pull away. That broken hand of his probably still hurts like fucking hell. That one time, when I crushed my finger in the garage door, it hurt for months longer than the doctor told me it would. That's pain for you. Persistent. Relentless. A demon with reaching claws.

I realize then that it isn't that Aaron Fadler thinks he still shits rainbows and fairy glitter; he just doesn't relish the fact that he's gone over to the dark side. He exists here because he has to. And now that he's wrapped up in Havoc's shadowed arms, he may as well have been dragged beneath the sea by a kraken.

There is no escape for Aaron.

I push my palms up against his, inked digits tangling together.

"Sometimes, I wonder if it wasn't you that should've gone to Nantucket," I say, wondering if I could've saved Aaron all those years ago. What if I'd marched up to Vic and looked him in the eye, refused to let him look away until he acknowledged that we could never let each other go. What if I'd told him that I belonged to Havoc and Havoc belonged to me? Would Aaron have been able to walk then?

His smile softens, and his eyes blaze with stark intent. It isn't difficult to guess what he might say.

"Not without you there," he assures me, giving my hands a squeeze and then releasing them.

Hael is waiting on the other side of the car, shoulder propped up against a telephone pole. It feels safe here somehow, being surrounded by Havoc. In every building, on every floor, there's at least one member of our crew. And if we do have a rat, well, I guess we'll deal with that when it comes.

But we're not running.

Not from the Grand Murder Party or the police, not even the feds.

"You two done getting all *Gone with the Wind* over there?" Hael asks with a cocky chuckle, turning and heading up a narrow walkway toward a derelict front porch. Victor is already there, unlocking the door with a key and letting it swing inward on rusted hinges.

"Have you ever actually read or seen *Gone with the Wind*?" I ask, cocking an eyebrow. "It has absolutely nothing to do with our romance."

"We're more like ..." Aaron begins, lighting up a cigarette as he steps onto the soft, damp wood of the porch. "*My Girl* or *Bridge to Terabithia*." I give

him a sharp look, but he just laughs, pushing chestnut curls away from his forehead. “What? That’s how all childhood romances end—in tragedy.”

“Hilarious,” I say with a roll of my eyes, stepping into the front entry of a house that, once upon a time, was probably very nice. As of now, the old Victorian is smashed between two brick apartment buildings built in the early seventies, rotting away and forgotten in the darkest part of the city.

“Looks like shit, don’t it?” Victor quips, moving into the damp, wet mustiness of the house as I wrinkle my nose. Oscar and Callum are at Joseph General together which both worries me and makes me feel better all at the same time. Cal most *definitely* needed medical treatment, but at the same time, I don’t like the idea of us being separated.

We are strongest together.

“It’s ... barely livable,” I admit, and Vic chuckles, shaking his head as he goes for the stairs and Aaron and Hael fan out to secure the house on either side of me. I decide to follow Vic up, past threadbare sofas and peeling wallpaper. There’s a TV at one end of the living room that looks like it was probably purchased in the late eighties.

I slide my hand up the banister, finding myself in a hallway that stretches out on either side. There are half a dozen doors up here, most of them shut tight. Vic is in the doorway to the bathroom, peering at the toilet and the shower with a frown.

“Fuck, this is rough—even for Prescott.” He snorts a laugh and steps into the room, testing the toilet to make sure it flushes. “We won’t stay here for long, don’t worry. Just a week or two.”

“You’re not actually considering sending us all to Oak Valley, are you?” I ask, because I’m having a hard time getting that out of my head. The rich are just as monstrous as the poor, only they have resources to fund their dark ambitions.

“Whatever it takes, wife,” Vic tells me, turning the tap in the shower on and standing up with a frown as the water spurts like a freshman during his first time and then craps out completely. The sound of old pipes echoes in the walls and then the shower coughs up some steamy water. Victor turns his head to look back at me, an apology resting somewhere in his face that I don’t quite understand. “You and Aaron will be able to see the girls, we’ll have round the clock security, and there is no way in fuck the GMP will storm Oak Valley. Too many risky politics involved. Half the students’

parents are paying customers with private militia.”

Victor turns back around to look at me, but it’s hard to argue with that logic.

“We broke in pretty goddamn easily,” I repeat, but I’ve already had this discussion with Aaron. I scrub both hands over my face as Vic approaches me, grabbing the water bottle from my pants and sliding it out in a way that’s far more intense and sexually charged than it ought to be.

“Look at me, Bernadette,” he says, putting both of his big hands on my neck, one on either side. His palms are warm, his touch bringing to life all the winter-dead parts of me, a searing summer day that chases away the cold. I keep my focus on his face, reaching up to place my hands over the tops of his. “If you don’t think the Oak Valley idea is a good one: tell me. I trust your judgement.”

“Do you?” I ask, and he smiles, but it’s a tad lopsided.

“On most things. When it comes to putting yourself in danger, nah, I don’t trust that at all. You’re the queen, but I’m still the boss.” He presses a kiss to my mouth that tastes like dangerous promises and violent heat, of all the horrible things he’d like to do to me in the dark of this abandoned house. “So, what do you think we should do, Bernie? What’s your next move?”

“I say we retaliate hard-and-fast—in the way we do best.” I wet my lips, thinking about all the things I suffered at the hands of the ones I loved the most. “Havoc’s specialty is inflicting pain without leaving any marks. When you locked me in that closet”—and here Vic at least has the common decency to cringe—“you tore me apart in ways that hurt to the very core of my soul. And yet, there was no evidence of it. Nobody would ever know by looking at me who put the darkness in my gaze and the vengeance in my smile, right?”

“Little poet princess,” Vic grumbles, giving my neck a slight squeeze before he drops his hands to his sides. “Go on.”

“We do the same here and now. We retaliate but in ways that make it look like we’re not doing anything at all. Starting with Mason Miller.” I exhale as I lay my palms flat against Vic’s chest, the diamond ring on my finger catching a stray bit of sunlight from the leaky skylight above my head. “Let me talk to Stacey’s girls. They deserve to know they’re under our protection—whether they agree to this plan or not.”

Vic nods, watching as my hands creep up his chest and curl around his shoulders.

“That works for me, provided you meet with them someplace secure.” His jaw works a bit as his dark eyes sweep me. “And for what it’s worth: I’m sorry, Bernadette.”

“Don’t do that to me,” I groan, trying to pull away and finding myself captured in his orbit, like always. He has but to snap his fingers and command my heart; I’m a soldier for him in so many ways. The only thing that makes that fact bearable is that I know the reverse is true: Victor Channing has always been mine.

“Don’t do what?” he asks, sliding an arm around my waist and bringing my body close. “Apologize? Why? Are you allergic to feelings, Mrs. Channing? If I fuck up, I say sorry. Anybody who lacks the ability to do that should get their head checked. Being wrong isn’t the end of the world; we all make mistakes.”

“And this apology is for what, exactly?” I ask as his eyes soften in just such a way that I feel my heart breaking all over again. He has no right to show me his vulnerable side and make me love him even more. No right.

“For handling the Trinity thing the way I did. In the end, all I did was hurt you and it didn’t matter a goddamn bit. You were right: I should’ve let my obsession for you guide the way. I always have.” He leans down, like he might kiss me, but pauses at the last second and turns his head away. The nearness of his mouth infuriates me, and I dig my nails into the back of his head, probably making his scalp bleed. He doesn’t seem to give two fucks either way. “For once, I thought maybe I could prove my love wasn’t selfish.” Vic glances back at me, and our noses brush. It’s like, he wants to keep talking, but the magnetic pull of his mouth to mine is making it hard to keep any distance. “I’m not too proud to admit my mistakes.”

He releases me and then, much to my surprise, gets down on his fucking knees.

I just stare at him, heart thundering in the quiet space of the old house, the smell of must and long-buried memories present in every breath that I take.

“What are you doing?” I ask as Vic looks up at me, a tattooed god prostrating himself for my benefit and mine alone. I’d bet you every dollar of that inheritance that he’s never done this for another woman. Shit, I bet he’s never done this for any of the other boys either.

“I know sometimes it seems like I know exactly what I’m doing at all times, but I don’t. Despite everything, I’m just eighteen years old and I’m

figuring it out as I go.” Victor blinks up at me, settling back on his heels. “I’m not too proud to admit that.” He pauses again, like he’s waiting for something from me.

“Then let’s figure it out together,” I tell him, cupping the side of his face and loving the way his eyes close almost involuntarily, like my touch is a drug, one that he’d happily OD on like I’m sure a dozen former Prescott residents have before in this very house. It’s not a pretty metaphor, but there’s not a lot that’s pretty in our world. That is, unless, as Callum suggested, pain becomes pretty to those who have too much of it. “Don’t push me aside because your emotions are too intense, or you don’t know what to do, or you’re scared.”

Vic snorts and lowers his head. When he looks up, I can see it there in his face: that’s the truth of it. I terrify him in a way he’s never feared for anything before. I understand that emotion because I feel it, too, this almost inevitable descent into tragedy. Everything about us feels tragic, really, like one of those old fairy tales with a not so happy ending.

“The last time I was afraid like this, I was five years old. It was the day Ophelia and my father discussed who had to take care of me. The reason I was so fucking scared that day was because I was worried that it would be her, that she would take my hand and drag me away from my abusive, alcoholic father, and the nightmare of south Prescott. Because, despite all of those things, she was the worse of the two.” Victor’s lids drop over his dark eyes, like he’s carried away in thought. “I ...” he starts, but then it’s like whatever he wants to say gets caught on his mouth on the way out, an ugly truth that bleeds. “Before that ...”

My heart stutters and gets caught in my throat, and then I just know that I can’t stay standing anymore. I kneel down in front of him so that we’re facing each other, just two teenagers with old souls and a mountain of cards stacked against them.

But that’s the fun part, you know. Seeing the underdog pull through. That’s what I want, some proof that justice and vengeance both exist, that bad people can be punished, that good people can win—even if it’s a rare and distant sort of thing. Hope, right. The thing with feathers ...

“She touched you, didn’t she?” I ask, because it’s the one thing I never expected from Vic’s past. He’s such a careful man; he hides his pain so well. He disguises it with his dominance. But he’s only just now becoming an

adult, and he hasn't left all of that childhood pain and trauma behind the way he thinks he does.

"Her ..." he breathes, looking into my face with an earnest sort of expression that betrays all of that long-suffering fear. "Her friends. At the fancy parties ..." He trails off and wets his lips, closing his eyes for a moment and scrubbing both hands down his face. He leaves them there for a long moment before dropping them to his lap and looking at me with an expression made of obsidian eyes and a mouth as sharp and dangerous as a knife. "This thing, this ... perversion, it's been running in Springfield for a long time. This isn't new. None of it is."

I sit there for a moment, fingers twitching in my lap. My head is filled with the white noise of rage. It's something I've been dealing with for a long, long time. But, as Victor has warned me on multiple occasions, I need to control it and throw it at the right target at the right time.

"And then they took my baby ..." he growls, and I close my eyes, my body breaking out in goose bumps. "They took my fucking baby from me." A gasp slips from me as he wraps his arms around me and drags me into him. Somehow, I'm already anticipating the move, throwing my own arms around his neck and squeezing him like the fate of the universe depends on it.

Since he just so happens to be the center of mine, I guess it really fucking does.

CHAPTER

TEN

Stacey's girls are willing to meet me at the nail art place down the block. And by nail art place, I mean that girl whose aunt will do your nails for like fifteen bucks and make it look like you paid three hundred at the stuffy Oak Park place with the weird French name.

"RIP, my love," one of the girls says, eyeing her coffin-tipped pink nails with a frown and watery eyes. "Shit, I'm sorry." She dashes her hand across her face and shakes her head. "The nails are fly, girl. I just ... it's been hard without Stacey, you know?"

"It was all my fault," one of the other girls says, her face swollen and mottled with bruises. Clearly, at some point recently, she got the shit kicked out of her. Worse than me, even. I'm guessing this is the girl that Stacey's crew got back alive. "I picked the john. I ... and I'm the one that told those GMP motherfuckers that I worked for Havoc." She glances away sharply, braided hair swinging with the motion. "You sure you aren't here to kill me?"

"I'm here to tell you that we want you in our crew," I say, and several of the girls exchange glances with one another. They don't seem nearly as surprised as I might've thought. I look up at the woman across from me, some gorgeous thirty-something that shapes my ragged ass nails into a feast for the eyes. Matte black, coffin-tips, each nail hand-painted with a filigreed letter pertaining to *HAVOC* and blessed with a jewel of some sort. On my right pointer finger, she pierces a hole through the tip of the nail and puts a

ring on it that matches the ones I wear in my belly button.

“No surprise,” one of the others says, checking her purple nails over and tossing me a look that’s split between animosity and curiosity. As if she can’t help herself, her gaze strays over to Hael Harbin, sitting in a chair behind me and watching the proceedings with curiosity, like he’s never been around a bunch of Prescott bitches getting their nails did before. It’s sort of a thing in this neighborhood. “What else would you do? Considering you failed to keep Stacey safe. I thought Havoc was supposed to be our avenging angel, huh? Well, prove it.”

“Don’t talk to them like that, Tiff,” the first girl says, the one who was crying over Stacey. “They saved our asses. You think we all wouldn’t be dead if it weren’t for Havoc? Besides, we’re the ones who robbed the GMP.” This girl turns to me, nodding her head, like she’s already made a decision. I vaguely recognize her as the chick that was grinding on that boy in the cafeteria that day, the day that Stacey officially dropped her Havoc request. “You got a plan, don’t you, Havoc Girl?”

“Maybe you need help working all that yummy Havoc dick?” another one of them asks. In total, there are almost a dozen girls crammed into this little apartment, watching me. And this is just the upper echelon of Stacey’s organization. Like I said, queen bee of Prescott High. With that title open and available, I know I have to step up and seize the crown. “How do you do it anyway, keep all five of those boys satisfied?”

I glance back to find Hael grinning at me. He folds his hands together behind his head and cocks an eyebrow. We’re only about three houses down from the place we’re staying, but I’ve got an entourage anyway. Victor is downstairs, a bit too ... primal and male to fit into this crowd. It might be mixed race up in here—we have girls in every color of the human rainbow—but it is a distinctly feminine atmosphere. They might like to fuck Prescott boys, but they sure as shit won’t take any orders from them.

“With a wet pussy and a smile?” I suggest, and the girls howl with laughter.

“Bitch, you’re legendary,” Crying Girl says, nodding her head again. Her red hair has been shaved close to her head in mourning, but her nails are fucking fabulous. “I’m Vera, by the way. I’ll speak to the other girls, but I can’t see any of them turning down your offer. We have to have each other’s backs here in Prescott; you know that Stacey always had yours.”

A shiver takes over me, and I nod. Stacey really did always have our backs. *Shit, shit, shit.* I feel my face get tight and suck in a sharp breath.

“I do know that. Which is why we’re taking this seriously.” I withdraw my hands as Vera’s aunt sits back in her seat and leaves me to examine my nails. This is legitimately the best nail art I’ve ever had in my life. The matte black color matches the lipstick I’m wearing today, a shade known simply by the silhouetted bat swarm that covers the lid. It doesn’t even have a name, just a symbol.

Now, my nails as well as my knuckles say Havoc. I reach up and push a bit of red-tipped hair back from my forehead, turning around on the swivel stool so I can see Hael while I talk. He watches me do my thing, even as the girls take turns scoping him out. I wonder if any of them ever fucked him? I’m afraid to ask because, even though I’m a feminist in my very blood and bones, I’m also just a little bit animal. I get jealous much easier than I should.

“I need your help,” I start and a girl wearing huge falsies lifts her hand, perched on the edge of a sofa with her arm in a sling. I wonder if she got that injury during the shooting?

“If you want our help, answer a few questions first.” She grins, and I feel a bit of the tension in the room dissipate. I’m being offered an olive branch here, initiated into this circle of women even though I’m not entirely sure that I deserve it. “Which one of the Havoc Boys has the biggest dick?”

Laughter swirls through the air, riding the cool breeze from the open window on a cloud of sweet-smelling perfume and body spray. But even if they’re laughing, all eyes are on me and I’m expected to answer the question honestly.

My eyes flick once again to Hael’s honey-almond ones, but he’s just grinning back at me, hands still folded together behind his head, waiting. Obviously, he’s seen the other boys’ dicks, but I’m the only one well-acquainted enough with them to know for sure.

“Who do you think?” I snort, but Vera gives me a sharp look, and I know I’d better cough up answers here. This isn’t really about the boys though, is it? It’s a bonding exercise, a sharing of secrets, a building of camaraderie. “Are we talking length or circumference?”

“Both. Dish it out,” Vera says, snapping her fingers at me. Her eyes are the color of ice chips, pale, almost colorless, but with enough of a gray wash that she appears mysterious at first glance, almost otherworldly.

“Well, for girth, I’d have to say ... Aaron?” I start, and I notice money exchange hands almost immediately. Ah, these bitches are betting on this. Even Hael chuckles as I shrug my shoulders. “And length ... Victor.”

“Of course it’s Victor.” Tiff accepts cash from a few of the other girls, giving me a careful once-over.

“I’m hurt, Bernadette,” Hael moans, putting a hand to his chest like I’ve mortally wounded him. “But then, maybe these ladies are asking the wrong question? How about: who’s the best fuck?”

“Oh, good one!” Vera nods her head as she looks from Hael and back to me. I make extra sure to flip Hael off with my pretty new nails, and the girls titter like a flock of songbirds.

“Depends on the day.” I shrug my shoulders, knowing they’re not going to like that answer. It feels like a cop-out, like I’m too afraid to admit the truth. But that’s not it at all. It really does depend on the day, the time, my mood, the location ... “Each one of them is different, like a separate ingredient for the same dish. I need them all or it just doesn’t turn out right.”

There’s a long pause there as my words sink in, and then Vera shakes her head at me.

“Alright, alright, you win the biggest ho at Prescott award. Congratulations.” Vera leans back in her chair, running her pink-nailed hand over her shaved red hair. “So, tell me, Havoc Girl: what is it that you want from us?”

There’s a sudden shift in the mood, like the wind’s changed and brought with it the dark reality of our situation.

“Are any of you familiar with a man named Mason Miller?” I ask, and several of the girls exchange glances.

“The whore killer?” Tiff asks, looking over at Vera, her brown eyes darkening substantially. “Yeah, we know about him. We never lost a girl to him, but I have friends in Portland that have.”

I take a deep breath, pushing my natural anger down to the bottom of my stomach. *Control, Bernadette. That’s the most important thing here.*

“Well, we need to get rid of him. Him and Maxwell Barrasso—the leader of the GMP—both. Since we know Mason likes call girls—”

Vera cuts me off by raising her pink-nailed hand.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. You want us to send one of our girls into a room with the whore killer? Are you fucking kidding me? Do you actually want us in

your crew, or are we just fodder for your gang war with the GMP?”

I’m not mad at her for interrupting me; she has a point.

I stand up, the cream-colored sweater I’m wearing cropped and just barely long enough to hide the black sports bra underneath. The sweater has a bat silhouette on it with the words *Protect Our Pollinators* underneath. I’ve got on leather pants that I can move in if necessary, and a pair of combat boots with a knife hidden in the heel. Look, as much as I love my high heels, I think I need to take a break. Too many fights for my life recently, you know?

“I get it: it’s scary as fuck. But the alternative is worse: a GMP controlled Springfield. They’ll take charge of all your girls, make them turn tricks for Maxwell. Havoc isn’t asking that of you. This is a bait and switch move. We just need to get Mason to a public location.”

Vera is already shaking her head, and I find myself tapping that long nail with the ring through it against my thigh.

“He won’t come to Prescott—no matter what you say to him. He makes girls come to him. That’s his thing. Especially after the robbery. Nope, Havoc Girl. Think up a new plan.”

“It’s worth a try, at least,” I say, but most of the girls are mumbling now, shaking their heads at me.

“You can try,” Vera says with a skeptical brow raised in my direction. “But you’re just going to tip him off that you’re up to something. You’ll have to send someone to Mason Miller, and I can tell you right now: Stacey would never let one of us do something that dangerous. It’s not happening. If that’s your initiation requirement, we’ll all pass on Havoc’s offer.”

I think on that for a moment as Tiff looks me up and down and flips her beaded braids over one shoulder.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asks, and I glance over at her, my own brow raised in response. “You got a pussy, don’t you? Why don’t you meet with Mason?”

Hael laughs, and all eyes turn to him.

“Not a chance in fucking hell of that happening,” he says and several of the girls hiss in response.

“What? We’re disposable, but your girl isn’t? Look, we always send two girls to every job for safety. We can do that, give you an escort. But we’re not putting one of our ladies in a closed room with Mason Miller.” Vera stands up and looks from me to Hael. “Anyway, are y’all going to help with

Stacey's funeral? Her broke-ass daddy won't even claim her body. And we need money to give her the send-off she deserves."

"We'll pay for it," I say before Hael can intervene. "Think about what I said, okay? The invitation to join Havoc stands, even without the Mason thing." I head for the door and Hael rises to his feet to follow.

Several of the girls whistle at his retreating ass as we head out the door and down the curving staircase to the first floor.

"Did you ever sleep with Stacey?" I ask him abruptly, and he laughs. "No, seriously. You ... or any of the other guys?"

"Virgin Dick wasn't sleeping with anyone," Hael adds with another chuckle. "Aaron either. But you knew that, right? You're talking about me and Vic and Cal."

"Well, did you?" I ask, not caring if jealousy taints my voice for a moment. It's just me and him in the lobby of Vera's aunt's apartment building. I use the term *lobby* very loosely, too. Mostly, it's just a square box with some doors and a staircase at either end, an overflowing trash can in one corner, and a desk where a security guard might've sat once upon a time.

"Not Stacey or any of her girls," Hael promises, making an X over his heart. "You know that old saying, don't shit where you eat? I fucked a lot of Fuller girls, a few Oak Valley brats. Everybody knows Prescott chicks are trouble." He tousles my hair and I slap his hand away, but I'm relieved to hear that. I'm not sure that I could work with a girl who'd seen my man's dick. "Blackbird ..." he warns, grabbing me by the shoulders before I step outside.

We both pause as the notes of an unfamiliar song echo from upstairs, trailing from the open door of the apartment.

"For Stacey!" I hear, and then the sound of a champagne bottle being popped. After a moment, I recognize the song that's being played and snort. It's "*Straight Outta Vagina*" by Pussy Riot. Seems fitting, to be honest.

"What?" I ask when I realize that Hael is still staring at me like I've lost the fucking plot.

"You're not meeting with Mason," he tells me, a warning note in his voice that says he'll compromise on some things but not this. "Blackbird, you just lost our baby—"

"It was barely anything," I mumble, but Hael squeezes my shoulders even harder, leaning down to look into my eyes. His brown ones darken with the

severity of the situation.

“You’re not putting your life at risk for this stupid war. I’d just as soon pack up and leave. As much respect as I have for Prescott, as amazing as having that money would be, it isn’t worth it if you’re not around. You hear me?”

I just stare back at him, but the wheels in my mind are still turning.

It’d be even better if I got into a room with Mason. Because then, I could make certain that only one of us walks out of that room alive.

“Fuck,” Hael curses, gritting his teeth as he releases me and stands up. “Wait until Vic hears about this.” He turns away from me abruptly and heads for the front doors, shoving open the glass and calling out to Victor.

By the time I join him, I can already see that he’s filled Vic in on the situation.

“It isn’t happening,” Victor tells me, but I just return his dark stare with one of my own.

Evil deeds done in the dark, that’s our thing.

I’m already imagining all the ways that I could get Mason before he even realized what was coming.

There are coffins and caskets all around me, a sea of satin and mahogany, a virulent reminder that death waits around every corner. The one I’m looking at in particular has a red-lined interior, just like the one we buried the Thing alive in. Staring down at it now, I relive that entire moment in my head. *The ground, opened up and gaping, me in my dress, the boys in their suits. Masks, masks, masks. The grinning maws of skeletal faces.*

“You’re disappearing inside your head,” Oscar whispers from over my shoulder, stirring my hair and making me shiver. There’s just something about the Lucullan sumptuousness of his voice that gets to me. It’s like, he developed that voice so the world wouldn’t see how dark and damaged he is on the inside. *“You know how he did it? He tried to strangle me. And now it’s become a fetish of mine. How fucked-up is that?”*

I shiver again, stepping back from the coffin in front of me as Oscar’s confession about his father takes root in my mind. He stays where he is, my body bumping up against his. Long, inked fingers curl around the pink sleeve

of my leather Havoc jacket.

“Let’s just pick one for poor dear Stacey and get out of here,” he purrs, releasing me suddenly and stepping aside as the funeral director hovers in one corner, sweating and nervous and clearly uncomfortable at having two members of Havoc inside his place of business. “What does it matter anyway?” Oscar pauses and runs the palm of one hand down the side of a black coffin, closing his eyes like he, too, is trapped in some sort of nightmare or memory.

“No.” I glance over at the overweight man in his dark suit and somber perturbation. “Get out.”

The man hesitates for about half a second before he drags his simpering ass out the door.

I turn back to Oscar and find him watching me through yet another new pair of glasses. These ones are black, rectangular, so sharp and austere that they may as well be barbed wire, protecting his eyes from the soul searching they so desperately need.

“Do you guys use this place ...” I trail off, just in case there are cameras or something. I don’t have to finish that sentence for Oscar to know what I mean: *do you guys use this place to dispose of bodies?* I mean, we’re standing in the only funeral home located in all of the Prescott neighborhood, one that’s so familiar with our gang that they immediately opened their doors and let us in after-hours.

“No, too easy to track,” Oscar explains, his tie a jewel-toned purple that pairs well with the charcoal black color of the jacket and slacks. He taps his fingers against the side of another casket, watching me with those full moon eyes of his, just two silver discs in a well-mannered face. So well-mannered, in fact, that you’d never know the darkness that lies beneath.

He taps his fingers against the shiny black surface yet again as I pause next to another casket, a white one with a pink interior. It’s sitting on the ground, open. I know that in some places, the funeral homes have fancy displays where you can see casket color, shape, interior lining, all that stuff. But this is Prescott. We have coffins, sure, but they’re just haphazardly strewn about. Most of them are dented or scratched and, legally, are probably not fit to be sold. Again, south Prescott. It’s pure privilege to assume that everybody lives and exists and functions just the way you do. Sometimes, there are economic, cultural, or legal barriers.

I climb into the casket and sit down while Oscar scowls at me.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he asks as I lie back and cross my arms over my chest, staring up at a water-stained drop ceiling, my heart racing, eyes closing. *So this is what being dead feels like—irrelevance in a world that never stops.* I open my eyes again to find Oscar staring down at me, mouth creased into the most perfect frown.

“You’re so pretty, you know that?” I tell him, and he just sneers at me some more. But I haven’t forgotten what he said to me just days ago: *I’m in love with you. Desperately so.* Those words weren’t said lightly. They were laced with truth and thrown around me like a lasso, drawing me in so deep I have no hope of ever escaping. “If you’d wanted to get out of Prescott, you could’ve been a model or ... something.”

“Or something,” Oscar says, his voice dark as he stares down at me. “Now, out of the casket.” He extends a hand, one that’s literally dipped in ink. There are black crosses and crows, people without eyes, gravestones and a crescent moon. I look at his hand, but I don’t accept it.

“Stacey deserves the best,” is my response when, really, I could and should say something profound here. “I want her to have a nice place to rest.” Usually, I’m a fan of natural burials or cremation, but ... this is what her crew wants, so it’s what her crew will get.

“That doesn’t mean you have to test it out,” Oscar hisses, kneeling down beside the casket and curling his fingers around the edge. His eyes blaze with a fury that’s difficult to understand, so ... I decide to do the grown-up thing and ask him the fuck about it.

“What’s the matter?” I sit up, pushing the curtain of my hair back so I can look at him properly. “This isn’t triggering for you, is it? Because if it is, I’ll get out.”

Oscar stares at me for nearly a full minute before responding. But that’s okay. It’s better when somebody actually thinks about the words that leave their mouth before they blurt them out—not that I don’t do my fair share of blurting.

“I don’t like the idea of you being dead,” is what he tells me. We stare at each other, and that heartbeat of mine that was racing so fast before picks up speed until I feel like I might get dizzy. He may as well have just told me that we’re soul mates or something. There was that much romance in his weird, stilted sentence. Sometimes, with broken people, you work with what you

get, you embrace it, and you love them for what they can do.

I look back down at my lap, at the jeans with the holes in the knees, the ones that I wore through all on my own—no pre-ripped denim for this bitch. Not judging, just saying. If you don't have enough trauma and bullshit to rip your own jeans on the day-to-day, you can buy 'em, but you'll never be south Prescott.

"I'm processing," I tell Oscar, rubbing my hands against the pink satin interior. Why does it have to be so pretty and so comfy, just to put a corpse in? My throat constricts as I think about my sister, about her beautiful corpse wrapped up in blankets with a bottle of Pam's pills on the nightstand ... White flickers take over my vision and I scrub both hands down my face.

To say that I haven't fully processed the idea that my mother murdered my sister is an understatement.

Neil raped her.

Pam killed her.

Oscar's hand reaches out, tentative but steady, and falls across my own as they sit in my lap.

"Don't force it. Sometimes, it takes years."

I glance over at him, thinking about all the things he said about his father, how he tried to strangle him, how he killed his mother and siblings. That's a lot to process. And, apparently, we have a lot in common.

"Your hair ..." I start, removing one of my hands from underneath his and reaching up to finger the silken black strands. He flinches, but just barely, putting his tattooed hand back over mine and pinning it against his skull in a way he never would've done before. "You dyed it again."

The door opens at the far end of the room and Aaron appears, pausing when he realizes he's just walked in on a moment steeped in intimacy and connection.

"You guys are okay?" he asks because, really, we've been in here a long time. We were supposed to walk in, pick out a coffin, and pay the bill for Stacey's funeral with the money I dug up from Pam's backyard. That's it. Instead, here I am, sitting in a coffin and talking about Oscar's blond-to-black dye job. Even as a child, when we met at age eight, he had black hair which means that somebody dyed it for him. Who? Why?

"We'll be out in a minute," I say, and Aaron withdraws, heading back outside to wait with the other boys. Pretty sure Vic sent Oscar and me in here

on this errand on purpose. He does nothing in half-measures and, despite his jealousy and his need to possess me, he's done everything in his power to try to get me and Oscar to get along with one another.

"Why is your hair black?" I ask, and Oscar shudders, but even when he drops his hand from mine, he lets me play with his hair. I have the strongest urge to kiss him right now. It's so bad that my mouth literally aches as my gaze drops to that razor-thin line, a rapier sharpened and ready to spill blood. "Even as a kid, it was the color of ravens. Tell me."

He stares at me and then turns away, glancing toward the door where the funeral director left from. If the guy is smart, he'll leave us alone in here for as long as we need.

"My mother used to dye it," Oscar explains, sounding reasonably tired. A gang war, a school shooting, a new relationship ... that's all hard enough. But admitting your trauma, allowing yourself to be vulnerable, that takes energy that comes from the very depths of a person's soul. "She didn't want my father to find out that I wasn't his."

I just stare at him, blinking through the surprise.

"You weren't his?" I query back, and he shrugs one, perfect, genteel shoulder. *A model or ... something.* He could've been a social media sensation. Shit, he still could be. He could open up an OnlyFans page, flash that pretty inked and pierced dick of his, and rake in a goddamn fortune.

"Apparently not," he replies as the cool, green snake of jealousy twists and writhes inside my chest. I would never let him have an OnlyFans page. His cock is *mine*. The idea that no other woman has felt the glory of having it inside of her makes me almost giddy with feminine possession. *My property, my male, mine and mine alone.* "And no, I have no idea who my biological father is, and I don't care to know."

Oscar moves to stand up, but I grab his hand, keeping him there beside me. He looks down at our joined fingers and then back up at my face.

"You can talk to me," I tell him, wondering if he can hear the thin crack in my voice that says I need him to open up to me. Pamela killed Penelope. That's something I'm having a fuck of a lot of trouble digesting. Oscar isn't the only one who needs to talk: I do, too. We all do, I think. As a group, we need more time to just ... exist with one another. Everyday can't be about violence and survival; we have to find space to live. "Is that why your dad snapped? Because he found out?"

“Maybe. Among other things. He’d squandered his family fortune, too. That was a big part of it, I think.” Oscar glances away for a brief moment before turning back to me. This time—for the first time ever, actually—I can see the faintest hint of blue in his eyes. “He murdered his financial advisor just a few months prior. Before that, my grandmother, his own mother. I didn’t find out about all of that until later. He was unhinged and I’ve manifested his trauma. I dye my hair; I get off on choking people. What can I say, other than that I’m a monster?”

We just keep staring at each other, until I get it in my head to grab him by his hair and kiss him.

He doesn’t seem surprised, but his mouth is firmly closed against the invasion of my tongue, almost like he’s afraid to let himself go. It takes a bit of prying, but I finally manage to get him to open up to me, my nails digging into the back of his scalp as his inked fingers clutch the side of the casket so tightly that his skin pales with the strain.

“Not here,” he finally growls out, pulling away from me with a monumental amount of effort.

“Here.” That one word from me is a fucking order. “As your queen, I’m telling you to get your ass the fuck over here.” I sit up on my knees and throw my arms around his neck, pulling him close even as he shudders from the overwhelming experience of a Bernadette Blackbird hug. See, I’m really, really fucking good at hugs now because I keep recalling all the ones that Penelope gave me that I shirked off like they were nothing.

Because you never know how important a hug is until you realize you can never have another from the person you miss the most.

“Bernadette,” Oscar says, a warning clearly evident in his voice. He won’t hurt me though. Shit, he said it himself, that the only reason he gave into sex with me is because he knew that, out of all the people in the world, that I was the one person he would be able to keep safe, even in the aura of his own violent monstrosity.

“What?” I whisper, the word a challenge against his tempestuous mouth. “Too afraid to fuck me in a casket, Montauk?”

“Afraid?” he asks, a mocking laugh in his tone. But then his face darkens, and he shakes his head sharply. “Never.”

I let out a small gasp as Oscar takes me by the hair and punishes my mouth with the force of his, shoving his tongue between my lips and bringing these

soft little sounds to my lips that I wasn't even sure I was capable of. He kneads the back of my head with his fingers, tasting me, diving deeper. His body lords over the casket, trapping me inside of it as he kisses me in a way I imagine he's been waiting to do for a long time.

Completely unfettered.

He might be a master of knots, but thus far, the only person he's truly managed to truss up is himself, trapped in a web of emotional rope. It sloughs off as he kisses me, urging me back until he's fully crouched over the casket, a uniquely beautiful monster.

"Fuck," he growls, pulling back slightly and looking up at the ceiling, like he's checking for security cameras. There's a chance that some are hidden in the room, but unlikely. That sort of tech costs money and, like I said, Prescott. We use paper and pencils and textbooks from 1999. "Get on your hands and knees."

"Hands and knees?" I query with a quirked brow, but Oscar ignores me, reaching out and grabbing me by the hips. He flips me over as I let out a small sound of surprise. *Holy fuck*. One of those deft, inked hands of his sneaks around and unbuttons my jeans before he yanks them over my hips and ass, leaving them to bunch around my thighs.

There isn't a ton of room inside the casket, but there doesn't have to be. Just enough for him to kneel behind me, flicking the button on his slacks open as he grabs me by the hair and pulls my head back.

There's no lead-up to the violent thrusting of his hips, just a brief pressure as my body stretches to accommodate his. Oscar's pelvis slams into my ass, his cock hitting the end of me as I curl my hand over the edge of the casket, digging my pretty new nails into the side of it.

Like I told Stacey's second, that girl Vera, I handle all this dick with a wet pussy and a smile.

A wicked curve takes over my lips, and I let out a deep, throaty chuckle that has Oscar digging his fingers into my hips. He slams into me hard, the sound of flesh on flesh echoing in the quiet room. It isn't difficult to tell by the sound of it that I'm fucking soaked between the thighs. Thankfully, the bleeding has stopped. It's all desire keeping my monster's cock slick as he thrusts into me.

"Something funny?" he purrs as he leans over me, bracing one hand over the top of mine. With his other, he keeps hold of my hip.

“Nothing at all,” I promise as he works his hips against me. For somebody who’s still relatively inexperienced in the world of sex, he seems to know what he’s doing. Maybe he’s just a master of all the cardinal sins, working darkness into me with the sharp friction of his body inside of mine. “Keep going.”

“Yes, your majesty,” he growls out, grabbing a handful of my hair again and powering into me over and over and over. Pleasure courses through me in unstoppable waves, my thighs trapped together by my jeans, making him feel even bigger, making me seem even tighter.

Using my left hand for leverage, I start to push back against him, meeting each one of his thrusts with a movement of my own. Shit, I don’t even try to hide the throaty moans escaping my painted lips. Today’s color: *Broke-ass Bitch*. It’s the shade of obsessive love and irrational desire, caught somewhere between gray and purple. I swipe my tongue over it as Oscar fucks me in a pink-lined casket in some broke-ass funeral home in the worst neighborhood in town.

I come so hard that I actually bite my lip and make it bleed, my body shuddering and spasming as I struggle to stay upright. My inner muscles clench around Oscar’s inked cock, his piercings stroking me and making me purr like a kitty cat.

The orgasm rips through me and I collapse, my cheek pressed against the soft interior of the coffin as Oscar uses my body however he pleases. He fucks me until his hands clench so hard around my hips that I bite down on the pink cushion beneath my head. Oscar spills himself inside of me with a long, satisfying groan and then collapses on top of me.

We stay like that for several minutes, panting, catching our breath, readjusting to reality. Because when you get fucked like that, it’s as if nothing else in the entire world matters but for the joining of your souls.

Eventually, Oscar stands up, fixes his slacks, and then offers out a hand. This time, I take it, letting him pull me out of the world of the dead and right back into the nightmare of the living. He yanks me close, much closer than I expected, and actually holds me there for a moment, looking down and into my face.

“I don’t understand it all,” he says with a slight shake of his head, reaching up a hand to rub at the side of his face. There’s a smudge on his glasses right now, an actual *smudge*. And if you know Oscar Montauk, you know that he

doesn't allow simple human error like smudges on his fucking glasses. It's monumental, that smudge. Life-changing, really. "Why you like me, that is. Or any of us." He cups the side of my face with his pretty inked fingers and my eyes close of their own accord. I lean into his touch with a small sigh, feeling the proof of his obsession trickle out of me. "You could've been a model ... or something."

I smile and open my eyes.

"Or something. I'd much rather be a Havoc Girl." I press up to my tiptoes, plant a lipstick smudged kiss against his cheek, and then drop back to my heels just in time for a tentative knock to sound at a door marked *Employees Only*. "Come in," I say as the funeral director hesitantly cracks it open and slinks into the room like a kicked dog. I point back at the pink-lined casket behind me. "We'll take that one."

"Yes, miss," the man murmurs, refusing to make eye contact. If he knows we fucked in his funeral parlor, he doesn't have the balls to say a thing about it.

I take Oscar's hand in mine, the way Callum has no problem doing with me. "*It makes me feel human.*" He was so damn right about that. There's like nothing like a coffin-fuck followed by some chaste handholding to put the human experience into perspective.

"Hey," I start as I lead Oscar to the exterior door. The way he looks at me, it's a pinch of wariness mixed with overwhelming confusion—and tainted by love. He really does love me, doesn't he? This knave known as Oscar motherfucking Montauk. "Do you think you could show me a little of your knot mastery?"

The look he throws me is full of innuendo, but that's not the only thing I have in mind.

Murder is right up there alongside it.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

The feds know exactly where our safe house is. There was no way to hide our move across town from Sara Young. It's always a possibility that they'll leak our location to the GMP, but that's exactly why we're here. If Maxwell sends his goons into the heart of Prescott, they'll see exactly how influential our crew can be.

"Bernadette," Sara says after I open the door wearing pajamas and a yawn. Today is Stacey's funeral. There's always the possibility of trouble there, too, but we have to attend. We owe that much to her girls, at the very least. "I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

She offers me up a Styrofoam coffee cup with a plastic lid. Since it has no logo and looks jank as shit, it's likely from my favorite coffee shop two blocks over. The place doesn't even have a name, just a neon sign that says *Coffee*. It used to be a bakery, but everything else they served was crap, so they scrapped that part of the business and now just sell cups of coffee for a dollar out an old drive-thru window.

I take it, eyeing Sara warily as she stands there with her blond hair in a bun, her face cool and composed as it usually is. I'm aware that I'm balancing on the fine edge of a knife, caught somewhere between victim and perpetrator in the black-and-white depths of her mind.

"Your nails look amazing," she offers as I lift the cup to my lips, the little ring on the end of my pointer finger catching a stray shaft of early morning

sunlight. It's Friday now, February seventh. It *should* be a normal school day, but there's nothing normal after a school shooting, is there? Just a shaken and altered reality that makes you question everything you know about the world at large.

"Can't take credit," I say with a shrug of one shoulder. "One of Stacey's girl's aunts did it for me. Also, we draw heavily on black culture here in Prescott, so I kind of need to acknowledge that, too."

Sara just stares back at me and blinks her doe-like eyes. Constantine stands about ten steps behind her, scowling and flicking his eyes around like he's preparing to be mugged or shot at any moment. To be fair, he'd probably deserve it. I'm not certain that anyone in this neighborhood has had a positive experience with a cop.

Victor appears behind me, a six-foot-five monster of a man that I'm happy to take on as a personal shadow. He frowns down at police girl, shirtless and clearly annoyed at her intrusion. We all slept in, gathered together in one room for protection. Or so the boys say. Personally, I'd keep them with me every night, all the time, if I were to have my way.

"*QUEEN OF THE FREAKS*" by AViVA is playing on my new phone, left on the coffee table and turned up as loud as it can go. It makes me smile at Police Girl as she looks between Vic and me. This is my motherfucking personal anthem.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?" Vic says, letting the words roll off his tongue like a threat. Constantine moves a few steps forward but is at least intelligent enough not to provoke Victor. "Here to give us back our phones?"

Sara smiles. It's a pleasant smile but no less dangerous than the wickedness etched into Victor's face. It's a threat, a challenge.

"We found the bodies in the apartment buildings, thanks to your boyfriend's tip," Sara says, and again, I have to give her credit for referring to Callum as my boyfriend when my husband is standing right behind. Vic just blinks at her as I glance up at him, returning my attention to Police Girl and smiling.

"And?" I query, wondering why she's here when she could have easily called my new phone. I gave her the number when we left Aaron's house. My chest tightens. Already, I miss our little refuge in the middle of suburbia. There was a certain sense of coziness in those walls that is most definitely

missing from the safe house. Partially, I know I owe that coziness to Heather, Kara, and Ashley. My heart spasms slightly, and I exhale. Vic brought up the idea of Oak Valley again yesterday, but even though the thought of attending some snooty ass prep school makes me want to upchuck all over Sara Young's sensible sneakers, I can't shake the idea that he's right.

We need a school and Prescott is shut indefinitely. The district has suggested online schooling for the rest of the year, the way they did back in the days of the 'rona virus. Lord knows that if they manage to implement that, it'll be a joke. Most of the kids that attend Prescott don't have a safe place to study, a device to study on, or a reliable internet connection. In short, they're about to get butt-rammed by the heavy hand of society. While Oak Valley Prep students enjoy university level education in their palace on the hill, the poor suffer and flail in the dregs.

"And one of the bodies we recovered was Russ Bauer, one of the enforcers for the Grand Murder Party. I'd love to pick Callum's brain and figure out how a high school student managed to take down a man that we've been after for years."

There's something to that phrase that tells me 'picking his brain' is a really nice way of saying *bring him in for questioning*.

"Is he in some kind of trouble?" I ask as Sara does her best to maintain a placid and unthreatening facial expression. Underneath it all though, I can sense it: the intense focus of an animal on the hunt.

"Is he here?" she asks, tucking her hands into the front pockets of her wide-legged khaki slacks. "We really do need to speak to him personally."

"I'm here," Cal says, standing on the lawn to the left of the front walk. Constantine actually jumps, putting his hand on his gun but stopping short of actually drawing it on the teenage boy in the hoodie hovering next to him. Callum smiles, his pink lips drawing my attention before I flick my gaze up to his blue eyes. He's watching me, but he carefully turns his focus back on the pair of feds standing in our decrepit-ass Prescott style yard. That is, weeds and stray bits of trash, a plastic tricycle that belongs to some random kid from two doors down. "What can I help you with?"

"How did you ..." Sara starts, glancing back up at the house. She takes a step back and spies an open window on the second floor. Her gaze moves back to Callum, thick with suspicion and twisted with confusion. She doesn't understand us at all; we don't fit into her good-versus-evil narrative of the

world. Killers are bad guys, right? What about killers who kill killers? It doesn't make any sense to her. "You came from the roof," she deduces and Callum laughs, hands tucked into the front pocket of his hoodie. He—very carefully—removes them, palms out, nonthreatening.

"A magician never gives away his tricks," he whispers huskily, his voice a dark, dangerous moving thing, something alive and twisted in a way that puts my entire body on edge. Thus far, the only boy brave enough to breach that tender barrier of my miscarriage is Oscar. How ... ironic. "Let me put on some shoes and I'll go with you."

He pads across the wet lawn past Sara Young and then pauses beside me. With Vic's huge body on one side, and Callum's right in front of me ... Shit, I've never felt safer or more turned-on. I look up at him as he reaches out and cups the side of my face in a pale, scarred hand. His thumb traces the curve of my lower lip.

"Save a seat for me at the funeral," he says, leaning down to brush his hot mouth against mine. Goose bumps spring up across my skin as he skirts past and disappears into the shadows of the house. Apparently, this place is a rental. Vic is paying almost a thousand dollars a month to rent this shitbox. Fucking Christ, all this gentrifying is screwing us here in south Prescott. At the same time, I know better than to direct my anger at fleeing suburbanites: guilt always begins at the top. Those people move here because it's cheap, because they've been pushed out of their own homes by the wealthy.

Not sure if you can tell, but ... I fucking hate billionaires. Despise 'em actually. Pretty sure it's impossible to be a billionaire and a good person at the same time. Definitely mutually exclusive concepts.

"He won't be back in time to attend the funeral, will he?" I ask and Sara Young just stares at me. "We haven't done anything wrong. Callum *defended* himself."

"He brawled with an enforcer for the Grand Murder Party and then shot him in the forehead," Sara explains, as if I haven't heard the story from somebody that was actually there. She turns around and starts down the sidewalk, but I follow after her.

"Careful, Havoc Girl," Vic murmurs, his deep voice rumbling through me, like thunder on the night of a summer storm. I glance back to find him with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, sweats slung low, shirtless and perfect. "Keep your temper."

I turn back to find Sara waiting at the end of the walk with Constantine.

“It isn’t against the law to defend yourself against a school shooter.” I cross my arms over the front of my pajama top, the one covered in coffins and crosses. It’s appropriately morbid. Bought it at the Hellhole almost a year ago with money I stole from Pam. Figured I should support a local business run by an ex-Prescott student—especially since I’ve stolen way too much from that fucking place. “So, what is this about? A scare tactic? Are you putting pressure on me because of your stupid plea deal?”

Sara laughs. The sound is a little dry, a bit tired. I’m blurring her lines and this woman, she’s someone who *loves* to color inside of them.

“You know, Bernadette,” she tells me, raking her gaze down my outfit while Constantine scowls at me. Seems to be the only thing he’s good at now, sneering and scowling. He tried, at first, when he was pretending to be a detective investigating Danny’s death. But now? He considers us all useless Prescott trash, and he isn’t afraid to show it. “I get the GMP’s motivations. And ... I get the Charter Crew’s. Hell, I even understand your mother’s to a certain extent.” She points at me with a perfectly manicured French tipped nail. “But it’s you that I don’t understand, you that I don’t get.”

I stare her down, my mouth pursed into a thin line. If one of my boys goes to prison, I will lose my shit trying to plan a jailbreak and an escape into a foreign country. I don’t want that. I don’t want to abandon Prescott and Springfield to the shadows.

“Maybe if you got to know us a little better, you would.” I’m looking at Sara’s petite face, even while Constantine snorts rude laughter from behind her. “Maybe, if you came to Stacey’s funeral today, that would go a ways in helping repair the relationship between the authorities and Prescott. Hell, you might learn something.”

“We have better things to do than attend the funeral of some teenage whore with a drug problem.” Constantine steps up beside Sara as she stiffens up and flicks an angry glance his way. She doesn’t share his sentiments perhaps?

My rage flares up so white and blinding that I almost throw a ring-studded punch at the federal agent’s face.

“Stacey did not have a drug problem,” I grind out, wondering why I’m so defensive of the girl now that she’s gone. In some strange way, I’d gotten attached to the idea of having a female friend, somebody who might actually understand me. I love my boys, don’t get me wrong, but I miss having a

woman to talk to. There's no substitute for a strong feminine bond like that. "And she wasn't a whore. Her girls cleaned up the sex trade around here."

"By being their own whores?" Constantine asks with another laugh. "Believe it or not: that's not exactly a revolutionary act."

"Isn't it?" I retort as Sara turns her attention back to me. "There's always going to be an underground, Constantine. There's always going to be a dark side. Stacey and her girls had sex workers collecting their own money, choosing their own clients."

"And robbing them blind," he interjects, looking me over with dark brown eyes.

"That's enough, John," Sara says, reaching out to put a hand on his arm. He shakes her off as footsteps sound on the walk behind me. *Cal*. You can only hear Callum Park coming when he wants you to. And when he does, it almost sounds like he's standing on his tiptoes—ready to move at a moment's notice.

"Until the world stops favoring the wealthy and corrupt, until there are opportunities for girls like Stacey Langford, you have to accept that they'll do whatever it takes to survive. They shouldn't have to sell their bodies, but the world you've created gives them few choices. But go ahead, mansplain to me what a revolution looks like. I'll wait."

I cross my arms over my chest as Constantine works his jaw in frustration. Unlike Sara, he has no desire to take my filthy tainted soul and wipe it clean. Luckily, it seems like Sara's the senior partner in their pairing; he defers to her.

"I'm ready," Cal says, pausing beside me in a pair of boots. He's clearly been ready for a while, hanging back and watching me verbally flay two FBI agents. "But I'd like to attend the funeral. This won't take long, will it?"

Sara looks at him for a moment before dropping her gaze back to mine. Her eyes are contemplative, swirling with ideas and theories. She *knows* we're dirty somehow, but she doesn't want to believe it. Strange circumstances are coming together, giving her reasons to give into her naivety and let us off the hook. There are bodies, but we didn't bury them. There are bad things happening in this town, but we're not doing them.

"Maybe we will go to the funeral," Sara says, surprising me. Constantine, too, if the look he throws is her any indication. He can't possibly fathom why she'd want to waste her time at the funeral of a dead whore. Anger rises up in

me, hot and filthy, but I push it aside. *Save it for later*, as Vic might say. *Wield it like a weapon*. I really should trust his advice, considering how goddamn similar we are. “Why don’t you give me the details and we can speak with Callum after?”

I stare right back at her, and I swear, the look on her pretty face is a challenge.

The thing is, I’m a dog of motherfucking war. I know exactly how to hold the stare of another predator and win. After a moment, Sara takes out her phone, unlocks the screen and passes it over to me.

After a split-second of hesitation, I take it and type in the address. Stacey’s funeral is being held at a different cemetery than the one where Pen is buried, thank god. I’m not sure if I’m ready to go back up there just yet. And not necessarily because of the trauma Neil put me through, but ... because I don’t how to face my sister just yet.

It wasn’t the Thing with his twisted appetite that finally snuffed out your sweet light? It was Mom? Pen, if you were so scared of Pamela, you should’ve told me ... You should’ve told me everything. We could’ve run away together. We could’ve taken Heather with us.

My breath catches because I know that, even in my desperate dreaming, a plan like that never would’ve worked.

“Starts in two hours,” I say, studying the two VGTF agents. Keep your friends close, your enemies closer, am I right? And I intend to keep Sara tucked up right beside me until we get through this. “For now, you can fuck right off. Prescott doesn’t like pigs—be they from the SPD or the FBI or the motherfucking CI-fucking-A.”

“Why don’t you see if you can’t get the F-word into your speech a bit more frequently?” Constantine jeers, turning away and heading for the passenger side of the car. “Shows off how much class you’ve got.”

“Oh, Constantine, baby,” I call as Sara starts after him, pausing to give me a look that clearly says *don’t get started with him*. “You have no idea how classy this bitch can be.”

I let out a throaty chuckle, eyes shifting to the right as I hear a monster sound system throbbing from down the block. Not entirely unexpected in this neighborhood, but ...

“Hael’s back.” Cal dips his chin briefly and then lifts a hand up to indicate the pink and white convertible rolling toward us. The top is down, the vintage

beauty clearly responsible for the music pulsing in the gray February afternoon. The song that's playing is "*Girls in the Hood*" by Megan Thee Stallion. My lips twitch. *Really, Hael Harbin? Really?*

"You motherfucker," I murmur, putting my hands together in a prayer position and touching them to my as-of-yet unpainted mouth. Don't worry though: I'll correct that later. I have an idea for a custom blended color for the funeral. Prescott girls know their lip color; I can't disgrace Stacey's memory with something basic.

Hael pulls the car up alongside the curb behind the maroon-colored Subaru that Sara's been driving. The paint is shiny and fresh, almost glaring in the tumbledown neighborhood with its overgrown lawns, faded apartment buildings, and moss-logged roofs. We have some mad car culture shit in Prescott, but you won't find any residents here leaving their vintage beauties outside to be stolen. Happens all the time. The rule at Prescott High is: if you're stupid enough to get your car stolen, then it doesn't belong to you anymore. Get over it.

Rumor has it that's how Scarlett Force met her main squeeze—by stealing his car and then totaling it.

"Hael Harbin," I warn as my heart thunders, and I forget for a moment that I'm supposed to be pissed off at the two VGTF agents standing in my yard. "What the fuck is this?"

But, of course, I know exactly what it is.

This is my '57 Cadillac Eldorado, the one he promised to restore for me.

Promise, delivered. There's even a bow on the motherfucking hood.

"Girl," he says, turning the song up and then opening the door and revealing the bloodred leather interior. "Your man doesn't say shit if he doesn't mean it." He lights up a cigarette and raises his red brows in Sara's direction. "Officers." He turns back to me, effectively dismissing them as unimportant. "Get that tight ass over here and check out your new ride."

He steps back and holds out a tattooed hand to indicate the driver's seat.

Personally, I'm rooted to the spot, as if the ivy spilling down the side of our rental house has trapped my ankles, bound me to Prescott soil so I can feel the dark but vibrant energy of the neighborhood.

"Probably stolen," Constantine murmurs, but I ignore him. If he's stupid enough to think the Havoc Boys would bring a stolen car around with the VGTF on our dick, then there's really no reason to worry about him at all.

“Hael ...” I start again as Megan sings about being a bad bitch.

“Blackbird,” he warns right back, reaching out and snatching my wrist. He yanks me up against him, putting his lips up to my ear and sucking the lobe into his hot mouth. My hands come up of their own accord, fingers curling in the front of his t-shirt. When he left this morning, I assumed he was checking on his mom. This ... I did not expect this at all. “Stop questioning your good fortune. Sometimes, good things happen. Just smile and say *thank you baby, yes I’d be happy to suck your dick later* and call it a day.”

I smack him in the chest, and he laughs, but we both know that we each owe each other oral sex. Regardless of the giving and receiving, neither of those scenarios is a punishment for either of us. As I bury my fingers in his shirt, dragging the neckline low enough that I can lick the *Hot Rod* ink on his chest, my eyes close and I summon up the memory of us fucking in the front seat of the Camaro. Or on the hood of it in Aaron’s driveway.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathe, thinking of the fuzzy pink dice he got me for Christmas. They’re admittedly hideous, and totally tacky, but I see now that they’ll go perfectly on the rearview mirror. “Actually, it might be the most beautiful thing that anyone has ever done for me.”

I press my face into his chest as he bands his tattooed arms around me. As always, he smells like coconut and motor oil, like grease-stained Prescott dreams dotted with vintage cars and inked hands and scrappy determination. Havoc owes its existence to Hael as much as to anyone else because without him, and his constant desperation to maintain cheer, to joke around when everything else seems to be falling apart, this would never work. He tempers the rest of us with a strength I don’t think even he knows he has.

“Shall we go for a drive?” he asks, and I nod, still pressed against him. Really, there are a lot of other ways I’d like to thank Hael Harbin—most of them involving either my pussy or my mouth wrapped around his dick. Unfortunately for both of us, the decorous officers of the Violent Gang Task Force are still standing here.

“Come inside for a minute,” Cal murmurs, moving up to stand beside us. As he does, and his heat joins with Hael’s, I start to wonder about combinations of boys. Like, does a Hael/Cal sandwich taste any different than a Hael/Vic sandwich? What about a Cal/Oscar with a side of Aaron? Will they enhance each other’s flavors or just cancel each other out?

Only one way to find out ...

“Inside,” Hael says, working his jaw briefly. “Okay.” He leans down and kisses my cheek with an affectionate ferocity that leaves me trembling slightly in my pj’s. Hael Harbin makes me feel safe, and excited about life, like we might do something crazy at any moment. Hold hands and dive into an ice-cold stream. Wake up at five in the morning to make pancakes. Pack an overnight bag and jump on an international flight. “Let’s go inside for a moment so you can get dressed? Then we’ll look at the car.”

I pull away from Hael just in time to see him lift a dark gaze and a scowl on the officers. They’re standing there, looking around the neighborhood and making notes on Sara’s phone. They even write down the license plate of the Eldorado which annoys the fuck out of me.

As Hael puts a hand on my lower back to guide me away, I catch a glimpse of said license plate, and my lips twitch. It’s a specialty plate featuring the infamous Crater Lake. Oh, and it’s personalized. Frankly, I’ve always thought of people who get personalized license plates as big fat douchebags, but ...

“*HAVOC?*” I choke out, disbelieving the ability of the Havoc Boys to actually get such a thing printed on a license plate. At first, I wonder if that’s such a good idea, advertising my gang affiliation to the world. But then I remember that it’s motherfucking tatted on my knuckles, that you couldn’t miss the Havoc Boys if you tried. Besides, whenever we’re about to do something illegal, we just steal a different car to use during the crime.

“*HAVOC,*” Hael confirms as he guides me up the walk and inside, past a shirtless and still-smoking Victor. Vic closes the door behind Callum, flicks a lock, and then scoots over to peek through the curtains.

“So goddamn predictable,” he murmurs as I try to pry myself away from the spell Hael seems to have cast over me. “They’re putting a tracker on the Eldorado.”

“Before they even finished parking, Constantine hopped out and stuck one to the Bronco and the Firebird.” Hael pauses and gives Vic a grim sort of look that very clearly says *apologies in advance*. “They tagged your Harley, too.”

“Motherfucker,” Vic growls as I strip off my pj shirt right there in the dining room, flashing my tits to all three boys present and startling a fourth when Aaron comes down the steps and pauses in the foyer.

Dragging a white t-shirt over my head, I shake my hair out and pretend like

my nipples aren't so hard that they hurt. Or that they're not showing through the fabric like two fresh pink roses—complete with thorns.

Aaron's eyes catch on my breasts before he reluctantly drags his gaze up to my face, swiping a hand over his own and shaking his head at me. I just smirk right back at him.

"A tracker, huh?" I murmur, moving over to peek out the curtain beside Vic. "What do we do about that? Borrow cars to get around?"

"No," Oscar says, also joining us from upstairs. "We'll use the trackers against them. Guide them where we want them to go." His razor-sharp mouth tilts up at one corner, and his eyes sparkle with all the ways we might fuck with the cops without actually committing any crimes. "It might be advantageous to do a few experiments, see if we can't lose them, and if we do, how long until they catch up to us."

"Which Bernie and I are very happily going to do as soon as they get the ever-loving fuck out of here," Hael says, and this time, he just throws the curtains nearest him open, cigarette clenched between his teeth as he waves at the detectives with a tight smile on his full lips. "Not very subtle, are they?"

Aaron huffs as he slumps into a chair and then hops right back up as it creaks and groans beneath his bulk.

"Jesus," he murmurs, shoving chestnut hair back from his forehead with clear annoyance. He could probably use a haircut. Not sure if I'm going to allow him to get one though. I sorta like his hair longer. "What need would they have to be subtle? We know they're after us; they know we know." He shrugs his big shoulders. "Anyway, Bernie." Aaron turns that piercing gaze of his over to me, the colors of his irises a mesmerizing blend that the artistic side of me is dying to recreate with a brush or a colored pencil. Except, my talent lies in poetry, right?

Spring and summer, a twisted tide, a gaze of made up of green grass and the sunshine that falls across the blades.

Eh. Maybe I shouldn't quit my day job as a gangster's wife? Or ... gangsters' wife? Apostrophes make all the difference, don't they?

"Yes, Aaron?" I ask as his eyes travel my body again, sliding across my breasts in just such a way that I shift a little under the intensity of it.

"Do you mind if I tag along?"

"Ooooh," Hael howls, tossing his head back as he laughs. The cigarette flops out of his mouth and he curses as he drops his chin and bats at the still

burning embers on his shirt. “You want to join us, do you, lover boy?” Hael continues to shake his shirt out as he chuckles at Aaron. “I hear you and Vic performed like pro-wrestlers in a tag-team match: all the faux fighting, all of the unnecessary drama, but damn good actors when it came time.”

“I meant on the drive, you fucking twat,” Aaron gripes back, flicking open the box of pink doughnuts on the table.

“Still can’t curse right,” Hael whistles, shaking his head. “Twat? You English or something? Say dickhead. Douchebag. Anything else.” He flashes a big white all-American grin on me before turning his attention to Callum. “But okay. You don’t want a three-way with me. What say you, buddy? Threesome?”

Cal chuckles darkly, crouching on the table despite the creaking sound it makes. He extracts a doughnut from the box and lifts it to that perfect mouth of his.

“I’d be down,” he says, shifting his attention over to Oscar. I praise his equanimity as he lifts his gray gaze to Cal’s blue one, as if he isn’t also thinking about threesomes. How could he not be? With all of us in agreement about the current state of our relationship, that opens up a hell of a lot of possibilities. Different combinations. I wonder if any of the guys has ever thought about touching another member of Havoc? “What about you, O?”

Oscar just stares back at Callum before shifting his gaze to mine and then dropping it right back to the screen of his iPad. I take his sudden, desperate silence to mean *yes*.

“Christ,” Vic murmurs, rolling his eyes as he gets a doughnut for himself, too. “Bunch of perverts. If you’re going out, do it now. We can’t be late to that funeral.” Victor gives me a look that says he knows how important Stacey and her legacy are to Prescott High. It would be seen as unbelievably rude and entirely anti-Prescott if he didn’t honor the passing of an alpha female from the southside.

“Let’s hit it, Blackbird,” Hael says, snatching the Eldorado keys off the table. He’s even added a lucky pink rabbit’s foot to the damn thing. “Slip into those buttery leather pants of yours and meet me outside.”

“On it,” I say, snatching a doughnut for myself as Aaron reaches out to grab my wrist.

“I’d do it,” he says as Hael gapes from behind him and then laughs some more. Doesn’t stop Aaron from saying what he wants to say. That’s just how

he is: if he feels a certain way about something, he isn't going to let it go. "Have a threesome ... or whatever with you again. Anything. For the way we've treated you, it's the least of what you deserve."

Aaron releases my arm and takes off as Hael chortles with laughter and Callum snickers. He storms past them, flipping them off over his shoulder before he slips outside and slams the door behind him.

"And you?" I ask Oscar, because I already know what Vic would say. He'd do it, probably will do it, but isn't a huge fan of sharing me. And that's the way I like him, so I'm cool with it. "While you're at it answering tough questions: when can I start calling you O? It's cute; I like it."

"Mm, let's start with the second answer: never. It should be Mr. Montauk to you." My turn to snort, but I at least get a tight smile out of him before he shakes his head and pushes his glasses up again. "We'll see on the first."

"Oh, come on, O, it's not like you didn't fuck me in a casket at the funeral home. That has to account for something?" I call as he takes off, heading for the stairs to, undoubtedly, put a suit on for the funeral.

Hael and Callum end up doubled over in laughter in the kitchen, and it occurs to me how fucked-up our life is ... but also how much I love it.

And how I'd really and truly do anything I could to protect it.

Stacey Langford's funeral is a wild, colorful affair, attended by girls in miniskirts and sequins, their faces painted in full Prescott glory. Lipstick colors with names like *Sordid Affair* and *Cop Killer* grace the mouths of some of the baddest bitches to ever set foot in the dump we call Prescott Senior High School.

Even Scarlett motherfucking Force is there.

I just stare at her two-toned hair from across the park, taking note of the three hulking dudes who seem glued to her side.

Another woman with a harem who just so happens to hail from the same shitbox high school as me. I'm impressed. Guess we breed 'em strong in the southside, huh? Part of me wants to sidle over to her, ask her advice, see how it works in the real world when you're dating and fucking and loving more than one man with a ferocity that frightens you

I rub at my temple with two fingers as Vera, Stacey's second-in-command,

moves over to stand beside me. Not six feet in front of me is the white casket with the pink lining that Oscar and I, uh, ‘picked out’ at the funeral home. The lid is closed on Stacey and her ruined face. Even now, standing on the lawn of Prescott Valley Cemetery, I can shut my eyes and see it all playing out in vibrant, punishing color.

“*You Stacey Langford?*”

“*Who the fuck wants to—*”

Bullet, brain, body slumping to the floor.

I bite my lower lip, tasting the sweet waxiness of a lipstick color called *Honey Buns*. It quite literally tastes like beeswax and soft summer afternoons spent by the creek.

“Fucking tragic, isn’t it?” Vera asks, her shaved red hair buzzed into a series of designs, one of which just so happens to be a capital ‘S’. The way her makeup and nails are done reminds me of last year’s winter formal, when she got busted stealing a dress and ended up attending the dance in her ragged-ass PE uniform.

I force a tight smile.

“I’m going to make it right, I promise,” I tell Vera, standing in an empty half-circle near the front of the crowd. Nobody dares jostles me or touches me, not with my boys slinking through the gathered mourners, taking note of the attendees, looking for anyone who doesn’t belong. Of course, there are two very obvious standouts in this group: Sara Young and John Constantine.

They stand across from me, on the other side of a very deep hole, just past the gleaming surface of a casket that I fucked my boyfriend in. Some might call that disrespect, but I’m pretty sure Stacey Langford would approve.

“Hope you know what you’re doing,” Vera tells me, pale eyes following my train of thought to the uptight federal agents and their prying eyes. “Bringing pigs to a Prescott funeral.”

I let my attention shift from the VGTF officers and back to Vera.

“Sara, at least, isn’t a bad person. Some part of her genuinely wants to help. I’m just ... letting her see a different side of Prescott.” I shrug my shoulders, like this is no big fucking deal. In reality, it’s a huge one. Because despite everything, despite all my bullshit and my bravado, I still want to believe that there’s good in the world and that Sara Young might—*might*—be a small part of that.

“So she doesn’t bust your boyfriends you mean?” Vera asks with a

chuckle, taking a swig from a pink flask and then handing it over to me. I accept it, tossing the drink back and trying not to cringe at the harsh, bitter grating of cheap vodka. Shit, give me a lighter and I could breathe flames the way Hael did at the Halloween party. It was only three months ago, but it may as well have been a lifetime with everything that's happened in-between.

"Something like that," I agree as the boys find their way to me, as they always do, the dogs of war slipped loose and returning to their mistress as faithfully as if they'd been leashed. My mouth twitches, but I make sure to keep that thought to myself. They wouldn't like to hear it.

"Coast is clear," Aaron says, pausing beside me, his gaze drifting over to Vera. I bet he's thinking about Mason Miller, and the plausibility of using Stacey's girls to get access to that fucker. We could order them to do it. Shit, we could get most any girl in this neighborhood to play whore for us. But ... it wouldn't be fair. If Mason is badass enough to take Cal on, then no girl in Prescott would stand a chance.

No girl except for ...

I pull a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of my pink leather Havoc jacket, slamming the bottom of it against the flat of my hand. Supposed to, like, pack the nicotine together back in the day before filters were invented. Now it's just a ritualistic bunch of bullshit, but we all need to pretend we have our everyday spells and charms, like tapping your nails on the top of a soda can to get rid of the bubbles.

"I need to go after Mason," I say, and Vera turns to look at me, raising a pierced brow. It's on-fleek for real. Prescott royalty right here. "It has to be me." I glance over at Aaron, but he's already laughing.

"No." That's more a response I'd expect from Victor, but my childhood sweetheart seems content with taking on a bit of a sour tone. Vera snorts and shakes her head, but she's smart enough not to say anything. "Are you kidding?" Aaron glances over to where Vic is standing, his eyes on the casket and not on me. When he sees Aaron look his way, he adjusts his attention over to me.

"What?"

"Bernie wants to dress up like a whore to go after Mason," Aaron tells him, willing to put aside their rivalry in order to keep me safe. That's cute, isn't it? My boys can shirk their jealousy and come together to act like overprotective douchebags. Vic snorts and shakes his head sharply, crossing muscular arms

over his chest. He's wearing a shirt that says *Mare's Nest* on it. I can only imagine he had it made at the local t-shirt silkscreen place as a joke.

The only person at this fucking funeral who's wearing a suit is Oscar fucking Montauk.

"What a roomy casket," the man in question remarks, curling his fingers over one of my shoulders. "And you are not parading around as an undercover hooker."

"Like there's anything wrong with that," Vera shoots back, giving me a look from beneath heavily shadowed blue lids. Challenging me. That's what she's doing. *You gonna let these boys run you, bitch?* "All you need to get a private audience with Mason Miller is a wet pussy and a smile. You were the one that told me you had those things in spades."

"No offense, Bernie," Cal whispers huskily, shaking his head as he takes a seat in one of the metal folding chairs surrounding the grave. There are six of them, silently reserved for Havoc. No signage needed. Only an idiot would sit in one of those chairs. Like, for example, Sara and Constantine. I just sigh and cross my arms over my chest as they move the two end seats over to the knoll behind the casket. "But if I couldn't beat Mason, you won't be able to. It's far too dangerous."

"So, what was the plan then?" Vera counters, stepping up in front of me and blocking the view of Stacey's casket. "You send one of my girls in and let her die in pursuit of your little gang war? That's some bullshit right there."

"She's right," I say as Hael whistles and lets his big body slump into the chair next to Cal. "I can't expect a girl under my protection to take on a task that's too dangerous for me."

"Blackbird, listen to me," Hael says, leaning forward and putting his elbows on his knees. He stares at me in earnest from eyes the color of honey and almonds. "You got the jump on me at the after-party. That shit, it ain't happening again."

I take a step forward and then crouch down beside the hole where Stacey's body will soon be buried.

Taking out Mason means dismantling the first brick that makes up the GMP. Then Maxwell. Ophelia. I grit my teeth as I reach out and grab a handful of dirt, tossing it into the hole and watching as the shadows of the earth swallow it up.

When I stand back up and turn, I see that the majority of the crowd is

watching us while they wait for the service to begin. Luckily, when I glance over my shoulder at the two VGTF officers, I see them engaged in a whispered conversation.

I look back at the boys, all five of them staring at me like they can barely resist touching me, holding me, tucking me under their chin to keep safe. And shit if I don't like it. In the same vein, it also pisses me off. It's possible to be a bitchy forward-thinking feminist while enjoying a little straight male possession. Definitely *not* mutually exclusive concepts.

"I'm going after Mason," I say, and Aaron frowns hard while Vic laughs.

"No, you are not," he says as I turn to Vera, meeting her pale eyes with my emerald tinted ones.

"Ignore them. They're just alpha-maleing around. You know how I can make contact with this prick?"

Vera glances toward the high priestess as the woman claps her hands to get the group's attention. Pretty sure Stacey wasn't religious at all but having a modern day witch preside over her funeral seems about right.

"There's James Barrasso's funeral," Vera suggests, ignoring the men in my life. Stacey's girls never did appreciate being ordered around by people with dicks. They'd much rather deal with other women. Can't say I blame them.

"We know all about the funeral, thank you," Oscar purrs, looking down his nose at Vera. "Hundreds of mourners, an open cemetery, private security. Complete waste of our time."

"Oh, yeah?" Vera quips back, popping her hip in that uniquely tragic Prescott style. I love that she's wearing a cropped pink shirt that says *Hot Girl* in forty-degree weather. That's Fahrenheit, by the way. I don't know shit about Celsius. This is urban America, yo, not fucking Europe or some shit. "Do you know about the reception Maxwell is having at Kay's?"

"Reception?" Victor echoes, exchanging a look with Oscar. Swear to fuck, put the two of them together, and they think they know goddamn everything. "And where the fuck is Kay's?"

Vera just laughs and shakes her head, focusing her attention on me.

"They all must have huge dicks for you to put up with that crap," she tells me, confident enough in my hold of Havoc's leashes to prevent any clapback from her snide commentary. "Kay's—we usually call it KKKay's because the GMP is racist AF—is a gang-owned strip club near West Burnside Street in Portland. Mason has already ordered a bunch of call girls to attend. He'll do

what he always does: pick a girl and take her upstairs to his bedroom. That's how often he's at the club, enough to have a private room."

There must be something in my gaze that tells Vera I'm not about to back down from the boys and their overprotective stares. As soon as we get home, I'm restarting this argument, setting it on fire and refusing to leave until I'm on my way to playing undercover hooker.

"Listen ..." she starts, exhaling sharply and reaching up to run a hand over her shaved head. "I've been thinking about this since you came to my auntie's place. I want to help avenge Stacey. Letting you do it by yourself seems ... cowardly somehow. But I'm also not willing to send in any of my girls. I'll make you a deal: I'll go if you go."

"It's a deal," I say, reaching out a hand and then shivering as Victor slides his palm over mine, drawing my hand away from Vera's outstretched one. She snaps her gum at him and narrows her eyes to slits.

"No," he repeats, and the wicked heat in his voice causes several other people in the crowd to step back as he glares down at Vera with crow-black eyes. "And this is non-negotiable." My other hand shoots out and snatches Vera's before Vic can stop me.

"Deal," I agree, and then I tear away from Vic to go sit with Sara Young. In fact, I move one of the metal chairs right beside her and get comfy. I purposely avoid the stares of the boys as the service begins and the crowd moves in to observe the proceedings.

After this is over, I'm going to get it.

But that's okay.

Because I already have a plan forming, one that involves the feds, the strip club, and Mason Miller. Cruel subtleties, that's Havoc's signature. I'm ready to sign this shit in blood.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

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Hael Harbin

Blood trickles over my split lip as I run a hand across my jaw, smearing crimson and letting out a low, dangerous laugh that Martin Harbin does not take seriously enough. Swear to god, if I didn't have fucking pigs watching my house in their shiny police cruisers, I would kill this motherfucker *today*.

"You want to hit me again?" I ask, standing up straight as blood drips to the front of my white wifebeater. Ironic, considering I'd rather grind up my father into hamburger meat than beat my wife. Well ... Victor's wife. For now. At some point, I'm marrying that girl—whether it's legal or not. Shit, if this country ever gets its head out of its Puritan-rooted ass and puts polyamory on the ballot, I'll vote that shit in and take Mrs. Harbin down the aisle.

Because there won't ever be a different Mrs. Harbin.

I've known that for a long time now.

"Do you?" I repeat when Martin doesn't answer, scoffing at me as he sits down to take off his muddied boots. "Punch your son until he's black-and-blue all over? You used to love that, seeing me cower. Well, guess what, cowboy, I'm a hell of a lot bigger than you now."

"Shut your fucking mouth, you little punk," Martin barks out at me, his confidence level boosted by the presence of the cops outside. With Havoc walking such a thin line, I really can't afford anymore physical altercations with my old man. That Sara chick is just looking for an excuse to bring one of us in.

"Don't you dare hit my son!" Marie shouts, clinging to my arm, tears streaming down her face. Her green eyes dart around the room, searching for enemies that aren't there. She's never been properly diagnosed, but we're guessing she's a paranoid schizophrenic. "*On en a après moi*," she murmurs again, and my heart breaks all over again. I lay my hand over hers and stare Martin down as he throws one of his muddy boots against the wall, spattering it with brown.

All of this—my mother's slowly swelling right eye, the fight between me and my father, the blood streaming down from his nose—over muddy boot prints. Marie *just* finished mopping the floor and this motherfucker comes in with his dirty work boots on.

“Est-ce que tu peux enlever tes bottes dans l'entrée s'il te plait?”

That's what she asked him: *can you please take your boots off at the door?*

“Your son is nothing but a punk,” Martin murmurs, lighting up a cigarette—despite the fact that he knows Marie hates smoking inside the house. This ... is why I try to respect my mother's wishes, even the ones I don't agree with. This woman's been through enough: she deserves some fucking respect. “There are cops outside for a reason, right? The fuck you do, son?”

Martin laughs as he stands up, cigarette dangling from his mouth as he looks me over. It's a menthol, and the smell of it makes me sick. I stare down at him, a good six inches taller than this piece of shit. Guess the universe does work in small favors, huh?

“Protective detail,” I say with a shrug, which isn't entirely untrue. The old man looks me over like I disgust him and then shoulders past me while Marie lets out another sob, squeezing her green eyes closed. Having Martin in prison for the last decade was one of the best things that ever happened to me and my mother. Even living in the homeless shelter for a while was worth it. Nobody can ever take those memories of Bernadette away from me. “For you. Because if they weren't here, I'd invite my best friends over for a sleepover.”

“Don't threaten me with your kiddie gang, boy,” Martin drawls, opening the fridge and tossing leftovers on the ground that he doesn't like. Glass shatters, Marie's homemade gumbo ends up plastered on the bottom of the cabinets. And my temper ... it amps up with every tense second I have to spend here.

“Ne le provoque pas,” Marie tells me. *Don't antagonize him.* I glance down at her, that old familiar anger squeezing my hand in time with her gentle caress. Sometimes, I just get so goddamn mad at Marie that I can't breathe. Why can't she just leave my father? He beats her. He kills pregnant young girls after hiring them for sex. He's ... exactly the type of person that would end up on a Bernadette-style vengeance list.

If only ... The timing of his release from prison is so unfortunate. Lined up with Bernadette's list, the rise of the Charter Crew, the flexing of the GMP's muscles. Killing him should be so easy, but it's become the most complicated thing in the world.

“Go see your girlfriend,” Marie tells me in accented English, her gaze sympathetic. When I told her about the miscarriage, she smacked me half a

dozen times in anger. And then, of course, she cried because she's Catholic and she has different ideas of what constitutes a baby than I do. Shit, she was devastated for me and Bernie. "But no more hanky-panky, Hael."

I swipe the rest of the blood from my face and give a wry smile.

"*Oui*, no more hanky-panky," I lie, because sometimes a white lie is preferable to telling your *maman* that you dream about that girl's painted mouth as she deep-throats your dick. "You either," I continue, following her down the hall to her room. I hate leaving her here with him, but I also can't risk being separated from the rest of Havoc right now. *One day, he's going to kill her*, I think, clenching my hands into fists.

Part of me wonders if I shouldn't just do it now, grab Martin by the back of the head and smash his face into the side of Marie's porcelain sink until it's stained with red. I could walk outside and surrender myself to the two uniformed officers idling in their cruiser across the street.

Marie would be safe.

But Havoc would be down a man. I'd lose Bernadette. It just isn't worth it.

"*Je t'aime Maman*," I whisper, giving her a kiss on the forehead as she parts the curtains, searching for an enemy that isn't there. Her visions always get worse when Martin's around, as if, having a real monster in the house, she tries twice as hard to find one elsewhere. Anything but accepting the truth.

And this, this is part of the reason why Victor's inheritance is so important. I can buy Marie a nice house, put her in it, and hire security to keep Martin away. That's all I want, my girl and my mom, safe and sound.

"Fuck." I swipe my hand down my face and head outside, pausing next to the Camaro with a frown on my face. I've had my guys at the garage on this shit for the last few weeks. Have to say, there's always a cheap thrill in trying out different models of cars. The Firebird is nice. I like the Bronco. But the '67 Camaro is where my heart is. In a sense, this is my Blackbird in car form. "Alright, girl, let's see what you got."

I run my hand over the fresh paint job, heading for the driver's side and climbing in. I leave the Firebird in the driveway for one of our crew members to pick up and back into the street with my favorite police officers on my ass.

"How did it go?" Oscar asks, already seated in the passenger seat. My hands tighten on the steering wheel. I'd almost forgotten I'd brought him along with me. I glance over to find him watching me from above the black

rims of his glasses.

“Martin deserves a hole in the ground and a grave marker so I know exactly where it is that I should be taking a piss when I visit the cemetery.” I dig a pack of cigarettes from my pocket, attempting to light one while I drive. And holy shit, I have to say, I missed driving this motherfucker. “The King of Sexy,” I breathe and Oscar sighs like I’ve torn out one of his fancy little nipple piercings. “Come on, man. If a car were going to get you hard, it’d be this one, am I right?”

“I can hardly see getting it up for an automobile,” he quips, but then, he’s also fucking around on his iPad.

“I call bullshit,” I snort, cig dangling from my mouth as I turn toward the bourgeois middle-class bliss of the Fuller neighborhood. Instead of heading back to Bernie and the mildew infested shit-stain of a safe house, we’re off to see my ex. Fucking Brittany. “You’d lube up and dick that iPad into the mattress if you could fit your cock into any of its holes.”

“You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?” Oscar returns, his voice slithering like a snake from that flat, angry mouth of his. It’s all a front, though. A façade. I’ve seen this motherfucker cry before. It’s been years, but I’ve seen it. He’s just damaged as shit. More damaged than I am. Makes me feel like I don’t have a right to complain about anything. That’s how we are here in Prescott, always comparing our tragedies and finding ourselves wanting. “If this car is the King of Sexy, then you are the king of sticking your dick into whatever hole will fit it.”

I snort, but he isn’t wrong. I was a fucking whore. I’m surprised Bernie even wants me with Señor Virgin Dick over here. He can wear a pretty white wedding dress for her, seeing as he saved himself and all.

“At least I know how to keep a lady entertained,” I retort, because my experience *has* come in handy. Blackbird appreciates it, I know she does. “Not like I nut five thrusts in the way you do.”

Oscar laughs at me, and the sound is reminiscent of nails on the rough surface of a gravestone. Much as I find the virgin thing funny, I’d never mess with this fucker. Cal, either. Shit, poor Aaron and I are definitely the least scary members of Havoc.

“I can assure you: I have no problems with performance. You should know: you’ve seen it.” Oscar scowls as we turn up the winding road that digs into the hill, cutting away the beauty of the forest. These hills used to be

wooded and wild. Now, houses slice through the pretty evergreen forest like blemishes, scars that can never be healed. All these SoCal motherfuckers moving up here and turning Oregon into the strip-mall studded desert that they left behind. Pisses me right the hell off.

Should be no surprise that Brittany's family moved here from LA.

We park in the driveway, but only I climb out. Brittany doesn't need or want to see Oscar here. At least the garage door is open so I can see that her father's Hummer isn't parked inside. Dealing with that man makes me stabby as fuck. He's so desperate to destroy me that I have to be careful here. If Brittany turns on me, Forrest Burr will drag me into this VGTF investigation and bury me.

"Hey baby," Brittany says, sniffing as she opens the door. I do my very best not to sigh. I just can't with all of this other woman drama. Never been a fan of it. I'm either fucking a chick or I'm not. And I am most definitely done with pretty little Brittany Burr. "Come in." She turns away and heads down the carpeted hallway toward the newly renovated kitchen.

Britt's sporting a long-sleeved pink sweater today, to hide all the scars on her back and arms. Our crew fucked her up good at the cabin. They didn't stop there, either. After I changed the plan to throw blame on the VGTF, Cal decided her face wasn't exactly off-limits.

Before she opens the fridge, she turns to me, her eyes slightly less bruised and swollen than the last time I saw her. Even with as much animosity and resentment that I feel toward her, seeing her like this makes me sick. Thinking about what happened to her makes me sick. Watching my father knock my mom around, reading the police report on what he did to that prostitute ... I just can't handle seeing women hurt.

It's my greatest weakness. Bernadette says it's a strength, too. Guess something can be both. Life exists in dualities and contradictions, doesn't it?

During the Prescott High Massacre—as the press calls it—I put my gun up to a man's forehead, pulled the trigger, and found myself spattered with his brains. It didn't bother me the way seeing Brittany's cut and bruised face does, her burned wrists, her baby bump hidden beneath that sweater.

Shit.

I scrub at my face.

"You want a soda or something?" she asks, but I shake my head. It's a struggle to play boyfriend and baby daddy, especially with Bernadette

waiting for me. Especially with the miscarriage. It's funny, isn't it, how afraid I was when I found out that Brittany was pregnant, and how fucking excited I was when Bernie told me the same damn thing. Of course, that joy only lasted a split-second before it was crushed with the hammer of reality.

A miscarriage.

Caused by the GMP.

On the turf of my fucking school.

My hands squeeze into fists so tight that my knuckles pop through my inked skin. Brittany notices and turns back to the fridge.

"Never mind then," she murmurs, but I snag the red Coke can from her hand anyway, popping the top and downing the fizzy bubbles as I watch her warily. It's been almost three weeks since her visit to the cabin, and she's been too freaked-out to ask me for sex. But it's coming. I can sense it. *Just a little longer*, I remind myself, studying her as she pours herself a glass of milk. Eventually, I'll get the pleasure of telling her that her cabin visit was punishment for betraying Havoc.

For now, we use her.

Whatever it takes to keep our family safe.

"Where's your dad?" I ask, because that's why I'm here. For information. She's already told me all sorts of fun things since I lied about the DNA results in front of Fuller High: Neil was a dirty cop working for the GMP, the VGTF is planning a raid, her father thinks he can get Maxwell Barrasso on RICO charges for the school shooting.

Britt snorts at me and scowls, tossing blond hair over her shoulder as she looks me over with a gaze I'm well familiar with: *you are pathetic. I only want you because my father hates you, and you're a bad boy, and you can fuck. In reality, I want to marry a Ken Doll with a 401k who can give me a white picket fence and a golden retriever.*

"You are going to need to get over your shit with my daddy," she says in that grating way of hers, the one that makes me wonder how I ever got it up to fuck her in the first place. I take a sip of the soda and wait while she sighs and slides onto one of the stools at the peninsula. She looked better with the dark hair she had on Halloween—not that it matters to me—but she looks even less attractive than usual to me. Or maybe it's just because I'm in love and the only girl in the world that matters is Blackbird? "He's working." She sips her milk as I grit my teeth and then force myself to exhale to relax. The

more of a dick I act like, the tighter she clams up.

“Working on what?”

Her brown eyes snap over to me and she scowls again.

“I’m not some informant for you to shake down, Hael. I’m the mother of your child”—*only in your fantasies, bitch*—“so you better learn to start treating me nicely.”

“Britt, if you know something, you should tell me. I won’t be much of a baby daddy if I’m dead or in jail.” I move over to stand in front of the peninsula across from Brittany, resting my elbows on the tile countertop. “You know we’d never hurt your father.” *Not unless we have to, too risky.* “What’s going on?”

“I’m not a mole, Hael,” Brittany grumbles, looking away from me to where a show’s playing on the TV. It’s *The Queen’s Gambit*, some chess drama about a wonder-girl that Bernadette’s been obsessed with for the last few days. I only watched, like, half an episode last night before I whipped my cock out and slid into the silken heat of my girl’s pussy. “Ugh, this show is ridiculous. Talk about ramming woke culture down your throat. It’s nothing but a femi-Nazi mess.”

My eye twitches, but I manage to keep my thoughts about that to myself. Bernie loves *The Queen’s Gambit*. Brittany looks like she wants to puke. Polar opposites. And there’s only one that I’m attracted to.

Brittany uses an app on her phone to turn the TV off and then turns back to look at me.

“Dad is worried. There are, like, a ton of missing Prescott kids.” Brittany opens a plastic container and pulls out a powdered doughnut, frowning down at it for several seconds before she finally takes a bite. She’s always had eating disorders, but I guess being pregnant makes starving yourself a bit harder. I take a doughnut for myself, waiting for her to continue with this train of thought. After all, we’ve only got limited time before the gig is up. As soon as the kid is born, she’ll know he isn’t mine. Rich Pratt, the real father of the baby she’s carrying, is black. I might not be as white as a virgin’s wedding dress the way Bernadette is, but Brittany will know the kid isn’t mine after taking one look at him. “He says I’ll be lucky if you make it to the baby’s birth. Apparently, that Nazi Portland gang is killing all your, like, crew? Is that what you call them? Crew?” Brittany takes another bite of her doughnut and then sets it aside with a deep frown. “They’re bringing in

cadaver dogs next week to search some property near Veneta.”

A chill takes over me, but I hide it by sipping the Coke in my hand.

Property near Veneta ... means Tom Muller’s property.

Means our bodies, dug up and exposed to the light of day. The only thing I can say about that is, we were *very* careful about leaving any evidence behind. If the VGTF finds our buried friends in the woods, they’ll connect them to the GMP. This could actually be a blessing in disguise for us, a chance to wash ourselves of our sins and start with a clean slate.

“Anything else?” I ask, and Brittany turns a look on me that’s so poisonous that I stand up and set the soda can aside.

“If you came over here just to grill me for gang crap, you can go.” She stands up and storms off down the hallway. Using my well-adjusted man-whore senses, I can tell she wants me to go after her, grab her by the shoulder, throw her into the wall and kiss her.

I’m more likely to plant one on Principal Vaughn, if you know what I mean.

I turn to head for the door as she screams at me from down the hall.

“Don’t let the door hit your ass on the way out!” she screeches as I roll my eyes and slam the front door behind me. Just in time to see Brittany’s dad, Forrest, pull into the driveway beside the Camaro.

Fucking hell.

“You,” he snarls, which is the most he ever really says to me. His beady eyes drift down to Oscar, sitting in the passenger seat of the Camaro with the window rolled down. In Forrest’s face, I can see that he’s remembering parading us down the hallways of Prescott High like he’d actually won something.

Once, there was this New York City mafia man named John Gotti. He was known as Teflon Don because the authorities could never get any charges to stick. Well, that’s Havoc. Shit just don’t stick to us.

“Me,” I reply, opening the door on the driver’s side and pausing as Forrest, the head of the local division of the VGTF and former chief of police for SPD, shoves my door closed, nearly severing my fucking fingers. On the inside, I felt that same familiar darkness, the twisting inside of me that promises I can never actually be a good guy—no matter how bad I want it.

All I can do is wear a cape for Blackbird. That’s what I got to offer.

“If you and your gangbanging friends know what’s good for you, you’ll

keep your noses clean and stay out of the shadows. Maxwell Barrasso is not a man you want to piss off. Much as I'd like to see you locked up for tormenting my baby girl, you *are* the father of her baby. I expect to see you stick around." He leans in toward me, nostrils flaring, bald head shiny under the weak February sunlight. "I'll be watching you, pathetic little punk-ass."

Forrest turns away and heads up the front walk while I reopen the driver's side door of the Camaro and slide onto the leather seat where Bernie and I fucked for the first time. My mouth twitches and I can't resist pulling out my phone to select "*Fire Up the Night*" by New Medicine. Ahh, sweet, sweet memories.

"Anything interesting to report?" Oscar asks, silver gaze focused on the iPad as he plots and schemes and calculates risks in that way of his. I find it annoying as shit, but Bernie practically wets her panties when he hisses insults her way. Guess the hate-sex must be pretty hot, huh?

"VGTF is bringing cadaver dogs to Tom's property," I say, and Oscar pauses. After a moment, he shrugs and turns back to the iPad. When I glance over, I see that he's working on our applications for Oak Valley Prep.

Ugh.

Prep school?

Gag me with a motherfucking spoon.

The thought of attending that prestigious shitbox makes me queasy, but I can see the merits in it. Protection, for one, and in a much nicer place than our Prescott rental. Two, a diploma which Vic needs more than any of us. I'd say he could go alone, but we can't afford to be separated, not right now. And three, we can keep an eye on that Trinity bitch.

Looks like Blackbird might get to see me in one of those preppy uniforms after all.

"This could be good for us," Oscar says, echoing my thoughts. I nod and start the engine, glancing over my shoulder as I pull out of the driveway. The next-door neighbor is staring at me like I've just walked out of a racist HP Lovecraft novel. The guy was a kook, but he came up with some weird shit.

I flip the woman off as I drive by.

"Provided we're not executed before graduation, yeah, I'd say it could be very good for us."

I head down the hill and back toward the safe house, the police cruiser following slowly along behind me.

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CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

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Hael Harbin

“How’s Brittany?” Bernadette pops off as soon as I step inside the mildew-ridden safe house. I swear to fuck, if I get, like, black mold disease or something from staying here, I’m going to ram a Prescott High pennant flag down Maxwell Barrasso’s throat.

I pause in front of her, parking my hands on my hips. *Fuck, this girl is sassy.* She’s popping her gum and glaring up at me from emerald eyes, a pair of hot pink leather cigarette pants molded over her plump ass, and an old Prescott High gym tank that probably belongs to Vic clinging to her full breasts. It’s so oversized and loose that her tits are practically hanging out the top and sides.

“Oh, Brittany,” I murmur, leaning over her and smelling that intoxicating peach and vanilla scent, the one that makes all five of us so crazy that we’d dedicate our lives to creating a gang just to protect it. That’s commitment right there. “So good at sucking dick, I swear, I never wanted to leave.”

Bernie slaps me across the face. It’s mostly teasing, but a little bit serious. Very Prescott. If I had, like, a varsity jacket or something, I’d lay it over her shoulders to claim her. Since there’s nothing like that around, I grab the pink leather Havoc jacket and slip it onto her beautiful shoulders.

My cock stirs in my jeans as I step back and look her over, head cocked to one side.

“You want to take the Eldorado out and see if you can’t get the hang of that stick shift, little bird?” I glance up as Victor comes into the room behind her, his dark eyes on mine. Back when we were thirteen, we made a pact to protect Bernadette but keep the romance out of it. Obviously, that didn’t last. We just can’t seem to help ourselves around her. But sharing isn’t easy for someone like Vic or Oscar or even Aaron.

But me, that’s something I can handle. Besides, the more times I offer to participate in a threesome or an orgy, the more sex I get. Win-win, baby.

“Try to see if you can’t lose the cops for a bit as Oscar suggested,” Vic starts, his hand tightening on the newel post at the bottom of the stairs. Seems like he takes a second to gather himself and then relaxes his hand before dropping it to his side. “And if you do, time it and see how long it takes them to catch up.”

I nod, tossing the Camaro's keys into the air and grabbing them in my palm when they fall back down.

"I'm sure Oscar will fill you in, but Brittany said the VGTF is taking cadaver dogs out to Tom's. It's only a matter of time before they see ... what the GMP is doing with all those dead Charter kids." I chew on my lip for a moment as I watch both Bernadette and Victor take in that information.

"What ... interesting news," Vic muses, likely wondering if we made any mistakes on the forensics side. A stray piece of hair. A fiber from a distinct item of clothing. Dirt from a very specific place. There's always a chance that the feds connect some of those murders to us. But there's also a really good chance that they *don't*, that they blame another gang for violence they deserve to be blamed for anyway. Consider it repayment for all the crimes the GMP committed that they've gotten away with, all the girls Mason's killed.

My throat gets tight.

Fuck. That's my worst nightmare right there, that something happens to Bernadette, that somehow, our selfishness and our need to keep her gets her killed. Nothing in our life so far has been filler; it's all been brutal necessity. And we all deserve that, don't we? A little fluff, a little fun, quiet moments to color the in-between.

"Super dope," I agree as Bernadette grabs my arm and lets me lead her to the door. Losing a police tail during a driving lesson should be fun. But I think Bernie's up for the challenge. "You miss me while I was gone?" I ask, and she gives me a very characteristically Prescott eyeroll.

"Miss you while you were up at Brittany's fancy house, pretending that her baby bump belongs to you? Of course not. I wasn't jealous at fucking all." Bernadette looks me over skeptically and then swats at me as I move to open the driver's side door for her. "No chivalrous shit, remember? We talked about that."

"Well, you fucked-up with Kali. So I get to open your damn door a time or two. Get that tight ass in the front seat and show me you've got the ovaries it takes to drive a fucking stick shift." I move over to the passenger's side and hop in, loving the way her hand roams over the bloodred leather beneath her perfect ass. With the other hand, she grips the steering wheel in a way that tells me I made the right choice. I might not be good at a lot, but I can tell what person needs what car and vice versa. There's something spiritual to it, like the wheels are your wings or some shit. "Do you know what to do?"

Bernadette exhales and nods, glancing back at the dash.

“Push the clutch down, start the car, release the brake?” she asks, her voice this throaty purr that reminds me of black-painted fingernails dancing down the length of my cock. I shiver and wet my lower lip, nodding as she does just that. We end up exiting the driveway in a jerking, halting manner, but after that, it goes much smoother.

“A natural,” I say as Bernadette snorts and then manages to get us going at the next stop with a bit more ease. “Like I said, natural.” Glancing over my shoulder, I see our usual two-up of uniformed officers following patiently along behind. If I don’t think Bernie can handle outrunning them, we’ll stop and get a shake or something so I can take over.

“Any special destination in mind?” she asks, eyes scanning streets she knows just as well as I do, despite the fact that she’s never driven them before. I haven’t forgotten that beautiful red ten-speed bike she used to ride before joining Havoc. Besides, nobody survives past adolescence in Prescott without at least learning some of the local geography. It could very well save your life one day.

“Mm,” I start, mulling it over for a moment as I fold my hands together behind my head, closing my eyes against the cool breeze. It’s still winter, sure, but we’re verging on the edge of spring. It’s a hell of a lot warmer today than it’s been in a while. “What about ... the Butte?”

“The Butte?” Bernadette retorts with a harsh laugh. “Are you kidding me?” I open my eyes just in time to catch her looking at me. She very quickly returns her attention to the road. “Hookup Point, you mean?”

“Only Fuller kids call it that,” I retort with a snort of my own. “We’re not in some black-and-white fifties movie. Say it like a Prescott kid.”

Bernie rolls her eyes at me as I grin.

“Pussy Point?” she says, but almost like it’s a question. “I’ve never actually been to Pussy Point. Let me guess: it’s rumored to have a special sort of magic that makes girls drop their skirts?”

“According to the biggest lesbian to ever attend Prescott High—Mara Chan—yes.” I slide one arm along the back of the seat as I scoot closer to her, taking advantage of the bench seat in the front to press our thighs together. The heat from her body percolates through me, and I shudder, sucking in a sharp breath as blood rushes to my cock. “She told me once that Pussy Point was a sure thing.”

“Why not call it Cock Point?” Bernadette challenges, flicking the blinker on and sending us in the direction of the racetrack. In order to use that shortcut, we need enough of a head start that the cops won’t see us. Otherwise, the secret will be out, and we’ll have fucked Prescott kids from using that shortcut for generations. Not a legacy I want to leave behind. You know, if there ever is a Prescott High again after this. “Because I can tell you: if I take you up to the Butte, you’re a sure thing.”

A laugh explodes from me, like a blackbird taking flight. See? I can do metaphors, too, even if I’m nowhere near Bernadette’s level of poetry.

“You’re an unholy little nightmare, you know that?” I tell her, but my voice is laced with affection. Seeing her sitting there in those hot pink pants, her tattooed left hand curled around the steering wheel, I’m filled with something I call dark bliss. It’s like, even though the whole world is fucked, even though bad shit happened and bad shit will continue to happen, I’m the happiest I’ve ever been in this moment. My girl, the car I worked my ass off to restore for her, and us. Havoc. Together.

There’s not a single one of us who hasn’t suffered in our family life, who hasn’t been betrayed by somebody that was supposed to love and care about us. That’s why we’re all—Victor included—okay with sharing Bernadette. She’s the center of the wheel, and we’re just spokes. But it takes all of us to keep the fucking thing rolling.

My body is thrown violently into the back of the seat as Bernadette turns the wheel to the left so sharply that we end up making a full U-turn, right there in the middle of traffic. There’s no hesitation when she shifts gears and rockets off down the street while the cruiser struggles to find a break in the traffic to follow after us.

“Well, fuck me,” I laugh as Bernadette grins, taking another wild left turn as we jostle down a street covered in potholes. She might be a new driver, but I don’t have to tell her the ins and outs of south Prescott. We take a narrow alley next, then another right. The racetrack isn’t too far off now. “You must be really eager to get to Pussy Point, eh?”

“And you must be really eager to not get any pussy when we get there,” she retorts, slowing briefly as we near the dirt road that leads to the racetrack. One look at her face is all it takes to know that she’s reliving that awful moment when Aaron crashed the Camaro and was dragged out of the driver’s side window. He could’ve died then. Callum could’ve died on the day of the

shooting. Things are rough for Havoc right now.

“If you’re not ready ...” I start, because even if Oscar and Bernie had sex at the funeral home, that doesn’t mean she wants me pawing at her hot pink pants and pressing my lips against the side of her pale throat. Of course, I can’t handle things staying too serious for too long, so I just grin and steer the conversation in a different direction. “I’m more than happy to just rub one out. Vic still has that video of you and me, in the master bedroom. I caught him jacking off to it just the other day.”

Bernadette snorts like she doesn’t believe me, but then her green eyes flick my direction as if for confirmation.

“Really?” she asks, sounding surprised. Not as surprised as I was when I opened the bathroom door and walked in on that shit. Victor just stared right back at me, stroking his cock a few last times before coming all over his own hand. Getting kicked out of the room that day twisted my raw anger into something ferocious. And then finding out that he’d had a threesome with Aaron of all people, when the two of them are like oil and friggin’ water, that undid me.

Might still be a little salty about the whole thing. Vic is supposed to be more than a leader; he’s supposed to be my best friend. Then again, seeing him masturbating to that video must mean he wasn’t as bothered by the whole thing as he pretended.

“Really,” I confirm as Bernie slows a bit, taking us down the curving road onto the track and then past it, toward the old campground and the suburban street just beyond it. From here, it’s a straight shot to the Butte.

“You don’t always have to pretend, you know,” she tells me finally, even after I’ve twisted the volume on the radio so Bonnie Tyler can sing about “ *Holding Out for a Hero* ”.

“Pretend about what?” I ask, but even if I act like one sometimes, I’m not an idiot. I know what she means. *You don’t have to pretend to be cheerful all the time. You don’t have to joke around when you’re pissed off. You can be honest.* The thing is, I don’t feel like I have a right to. Oscar had a much harder life than I ever did. My mom might have some mental health issues, and my dad might be a murdering sack of trash, but other than being homeless for a while, what else is there?

“Hael, don’t play that shit with me.” Bernadette guides us up the steep, winding road toward the Butte. I’m not worried though; it’s plenty wide

enough to make up for any rookie errors. Plus, there's a metal railing along the right-hand side. Worst case scenario, she damages the fresh paint job. The thought makes me cringe, but I needn't have worried: we make it to the top and into the empty parking lot without issue.

Bernie turns the ignition off as I pull out my phone, setting a stopwatch to see how long it takes the police to catch up to us. There's always the faint threat of the GMP, but with our cop buddies, the assault rifle I've got in the trunk, and Bernadette's scrappiness, we'll be okay. Victor wouldn't have allowed us to leave the safe house if he didn't agree.

"Three minutes," I say as the car ticks and cools around us and Bernadette adjusts her gaze from the beautiful vista in front of us and over to my face. She isn't done with that bit of conversation, about the pretending and all that.

"Hael," she warns as I lift my eyes from my phone screen to glance over at her. "Seriously. You can be real with me. With us. You don't always have to be chipper and happy and smiling all the goddamn time. That must get old?" She phrases this last bit as a question, but I'm not quite sure what to say. Does it? Even I don't really know the answer to that.

Blackbird seems content to wait, taking off her seatbelt and leaning back against the bloodred leather. She throws her legs over the top of mine, and I groan as my cock twitches in response. Even that casual touch is enough to ignite all the fire in my blood.

"It's how I cope," I tell her, and she nods because, of course, she's smart enough to have figured that out already.

"Your smiles are like Cal's hoodie or Vic's chain-smoking," she says as I lift a single brow in question. "Just a tic that you don't know how to function without."

"Oh, I see." I grin back at her, even though I'm quite literally doing the exact fucking thing she just accused me of. "My beatific fucking smiles are just tics, huh?"

"Be. Real. With. Me." My girl stares me down with bright emerald eyes, their color enhanced by the liquid gold of the setting sun. I've never been much of a poet—my vocabulary is half-slang, the rest curse words—but something about this woman makes me want to try to be better.

"I'm pissed at Victor," I admit, and Bernadette nods yet again. She's too smart to have not seen it. "I'm pissed because he kicked me out, and then he fucked you with Aaron. That should've been me. He owes me an apology."

“So tell him that.” She slips out of her pink leather jacket and tosses it into the back seat, reminding me that there’s no bra underneath her shirt. Her nipples are peaked points, straining against the fabric, and I find myself rubbing a palm over the growing erection trapped inside my jeans. Bernie notices, of course, but all she does is hook a mischievous little smile. “Tell *me* that. Are you mad at me, too? For letting him get away with that crap.”

I think about that for a minute. Am I? Could I ever be mad at Bernadette for anything?

“No.” I pause for a moment and then shake my head, raking the fingers of my right hand through my hair. “Maybe. Just a little.”

Her smile gets just a bit wider, a bit more real.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” she tells me, and I feel a bit of that hot ache buried deep in my chest cool a little. Her beautiful lips, those words ... it’s too much. I can’t help myself when I reach out a hand and cup the side of her face, bringing my mouth to hers. The first kiss is almost ... sweet? Wasn’t even aware I was capable of such a thing. But it’s like pressing a flame to dry kindling. Just a few brushes of lips later and we may as well have doused our mouths in gasoline and set them on fire.

“Eight minutes,” she murmurs against my lips, and then I’m yanking her onto my lap, encouraging her to rub that hot cunt of hers against my erection. The pink leather of the cigarette pants dips beneath the hard press of my fingers as I kiss along the edge of her jaw toward her ear, savoring the sweetness of her pale skin. “Let me make it up to you.”

Bernie’s inked hands drop to my button and fly, undoing my pants with sure, steady movements. I watch her with slightly parted lips, hunger roaring inside of me. How many times did I imagine this girl when I was with somebody else? Pretty much every fucking time.

Obsession.

We wear it and perform it well in Havoc, now don’t we?

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I say, pausing her hands before she gets the chance to free my cock from the confines of the tight denim. “If you’re planning on sucking me off, Miss Blackbird, then I’d like to remind you that you already owed me. I made you come first when we fucked in the driveway, so this is hardly making anything up. This was mine to begin with.” I fist a hand in her hair and then kiss away the sharp gasp that tears from her throat.

There’s one other vehicle up here—a classic Ford F100, 1955 I think—

with a couple sprawled out in the bed of the pickup. Their moans create a sensual background song to the sweet murmurs spilling from Bernadette's pink-painted lips. The color on her mouth matches her pants, and I get this hot thrill from imagining it smeared across my face and neck.

The sun is very quickly disappearing into the horizon, and the night throws up a blanket of stars that are only slightly obscured by the lights of the city. Springfield isn't *that* big of a town, after all. Just big enough to hold onto. Just big enough to rule.

I hit the button to bring the top down, glad that I added that little extra. Nobody wants to put the fucking thing down manually. Kills the mood. Cool air sweeps in around us, but it doesn't matter; there's enough heat in our bodies to make up for it.

"Then I guess I'll fulfill my end of the bet with my mouth and make up for my mistakes with Victor by using this tight little pussy." Bernadette grinds herself against me before grabbing my phone and checking the stopwatch once again. "Thirteen minutes," she murmurs, and then she starts up "*Cherry Pie*" by Warrant.

"Seriously though?" I ask, but I can't help the laugh that escapes as Bernadette tosses her hair in time to the music. "Classic stripper rock. Are you my stripper, baby?"

"Get your ass in the backseat," she tells me, sliding off my lap as I groan at the loss of her heat. I crank the volume up, happy that I put a little extra into the sound system of the Eldorado. Blew through a good quarter of my savings on the damn thing, but like, what's the point of driving such a beautiful car if you don't have the right soundtrack to go with it?

I hop into the back, stretching my legs along the bench seat as Bernie crawls over and straddles me. Her pretty little hands free my pulsing cock, teasing the pre-cum that leaks from the tip as she lifts her green eyes up to mine. Tucking some of that gorgeous hair behind her ear, she leans down, leather-clad ass up in the air as she slicks her tongue around the head.

Her mouth creates a torrid love affair with my cock as my fingers massage her scalp, encouraging her to take me as deep as she can. The slick feel of her tongue makes my balls contract, and I have to bite my lower lip to keep from spilling myself too early.

I'm going to savor this fucking moment.

The sound of tires on gravel precedes the police cruiser pulling into the lot,

and I glance briefly at the screen of my phone before chucking it into the front seat.

“Seventeen minutes,” I groan as the song switches to “*Porn Star Dancing*” by My Darkest Days and Zakk Wylde. The police keep their distance, parking in the space farthest from us, but with the top down, and Bernie’s ass sticking up the way it is, there can’t be any doubt as to what we’re up to over here.

And, like, I honestly couldn’t give a fuck less.

All that matters right now is the way Bernie squeezes the base of my shaft, her tongue slicking up the underside like she’s licking a goddamn lollipop. She flicks her gaze up to mine as she wraps her pink mouth around the tip, tongue shooting out and tasting me as my hips buck up against her face.

“We have an audience,” I tell her, but Bernie just chuckles, her mouth still wrapped around my cock. The vibration of that throaty sound vibrates my shaft, and my eyes roll back into my head. “Jesus Christ, Blackbird.”

“That’s nothing special,” she murmurs, yanking my jeans down and encouraging me to take them off. Well, shit. In the backseat of the Eldorado, the top open, the city stretched out before us ... The Ford F100 across the parking lot is bouncing quite nicely, letting me know that Pussy Point is living up to its name.

I kick my boots off and let Bernadette pants my ass. She sits up briefly, undoing her own pants and dipping her hand inside, her eyelids fluttering as she plays with her pussy for a moment. I have no clue what she’s doing, but I’m game to watch. When she withdraws her hand, her fingers are slick with her own lube.

I watch, fascinated, as she drops her mouth back to my cock, circling the base with her left hand and sucking the tip while at the same time inserting a lubed-up finger into my ass.

“Motherfucker,” I groan, the fingers of one hand digging into the seat while the other grips Bernie’s hair with a rough, almost violent contraction. There’s no controlling myself then. The orgasm slips from me along with a guttural sound that echoes across the parking lot and I shoot a hot stream of cum into my girl’s mouth.

She stays where she is as I pulse and thrust against her and then collapse into the seat.

“I take it you liked that,” Bernie purrs as I yank my shirt over my head and

offer it to her to clean her fingers off. She chucks it into the front seat and then crawls up against me, her breasts pressing against my chest as our mouths come together with a sweet heat, sultry rock music spilling out into the night.

“Thank fuck Oregon recently passed that close-in-age exemption law,” I say, still panting heavily as Bernadette trails hot kisses along the length of my jaw, pausing at the pulsing throb of my pulse. She pulls back just slightly and quirks a brow. “Romeo and Juliet law? No?”

“So you won’t get charged with statutory rape?” she queries back, and I nod. Technically, since I’m eighteen and she’s seventeen, and we’re being followed by cops, it could be bad news bear for me. “Oh, and that’s absolutely something Sara Young would do.” She sits up and combs her hair over her shoulder, her hands resting on my bare thighs.

A pleased scream sounds from the direction of the Ford across the lot and we grin at each other.

“This is fun, having a bit of an audience,” I murmur, snatching my boxers from the floor as Bernadette scoots back, and dragging them back on. “I mean, if that’s something you’re into, we’ve got a built-in one back home, now don’t we?”

Bernie’s eyes sparkle, and I wonder if she hasn’t thought about all the fun we could get up to together. Different partners, different groups, different ... arrangements. I wouldn’t mind being watched, the way Victor did that first night, when he filmed us. I’d like to do that again except, you know, without getting kicked out.

“You put your underwear back on,” she hazards, like she actually thinks I’m going to nut and run. Nah. I might’ve been a man-whore, but I was never that sort.

“Yeah, but only so I’m not flashing bare ass and getting myself arrested.” I grab her and she lets out a small gasp as I flip her body and pin her underneath me. My mouth finds Bernadette’s, sucking her lip between my teeth and biting down gently, just enough to make her squirm. “You yourself said it: if she can find a trumped-up charge to bring one of us, Police Girl will do it.”

“And why, exactly, would your bare ass be showing?” she whispers as I grin against her mouth, pressing close and encouraging her lips to part for my tongue. I’ve never tasted a girl so sweet with such an acidic mouth. Like, she

can pop off like the best of the Prescott bitches, but when we kiss, and I close my eyes, I imagine that we're just a pair of high school sweethearts from the fifties, destined to grow old together.

Feels like we could be, up here on 'Hookup Point', in this fifties car. Shit, even the Ford parked across the lot is from the fifties. Add in that leather Havoc jacket she was wearing, like she's one of the Pink Ladies from *Grease*, and our favorite drive-in, Wesley's. The soda fountain in south Prescott ...

I break away briefly to change the music from sultry rock to classic fifties hits.

"What on earth is this?" Bernadette asks as I start "*Where the Boys Are*" by Connie Francis.

"Just roll with it, Blackbird," I tell her, pushing her back onto the seat with a hand on her chest. I undo those sexy pink cigarette pants of hers—also, incidentally a fashion from the fifties—and yank them off along with her panties. It's full dark now, the city lights sparkling in the valley below us.

You'd never know, looking at us now, that we survived a school shooting less than two weeks prior. Or that we're in the middle of a gang war. No, up here on the Butte, everything else fades away. We're just two teenagers in the backseat of a pink Caddy with heated bodies and wandering hands.

"Blackbird," I start again as I part her sweet, white thighs with my tattooed hands. Bernie moans and lets her head fall back, completely unashamed at exposing the swollen plump heat of her cunt to me. My own breath catches and my lashes flutter. I can already feel blood rushing to my cock as I stare down at her, wearing Victor's old Prescott High tank, looking like a princess from another decade. "Those nights at the homeless shelter with you were some of the best days in my entire childhood."

"Don't say that," she whispers, but it's the truth and I'm not ashamed. "You have no idea what a comfort you were to me," she adds unexpectedly as I drop a single finger to the sweet curls between her legs. I've never liked girls that shave it all off. Kinda bothers me. Like, God or Goddess or Mother Nature put hair here for a reason, right? I run my fingers over those pale curls, teasing my finger down the slick line between Bernie's thighs until she parts her lips in a sexy pout. "For years, I thought about you whenever I got scared on a stormy night."

"No," I breathe, because I just can't take hearing that. It's too much. It's

far too much, more than someone like me deserves. “Blackbird ...” My thumb finds the swollen nub of her clit, sliding over it as she throws her arms back, hands clutching at the edge of the car behind her.

With my other hand, I tickle the softly dimpled flesh of her inner thighs, my eyes drinking in her perfect curves, the frantic rise and fall of her breasts as she closes her own eyes and pants in desperation and need. I can’t resist; I drop my mouth down between her thighs, sliding my tongue between her folds and swirling it around her clit.

She curves her legs over my shoulders, trapping me where she wants me and giving me the privilege of paying off my debt. My hands curve underneath her, cupping and kneading the rounded perfection of her ass as I taste that tart-sweetness of her cunt. There’s nothing else in the world like it, that soft fragrance, that dulcet tang on my tongue.

“Oh, Hael,” she groans, her hips rising up to meet my mouth. I lift my head up just enough so that I can look at her, her lids squeezed shut, her fingers digging into the Cadillac that I put so much work into. Just for her. This is a gift that I’d only ever give to my one and only.

A smile curves across my lips as I move my left hand—yeah, I’m a leftie—to her pussy, slipping a single finger inside of her and feeling the silken heat of her wrap around me.

“Shit.” The word escapes my lips before I drop my mouth back to her clit, adding a second finger and then a third, Bernadette’s body stretching to accommodate me. It’s so goddamn warm inside, so slick, the walls textured in a way that my cock full-well remembers. My hand pumps in and out as I use my tongue in a slow, languorous rhythm, my own hips grinding against the seat. With nothing but my boxers between me and the leather seat, I have no problem finding a spot that gets me just right.

As Connie sings about where the boys are, I only have one girl on my mind.

“Please, please, please,” Bernie moans, her back arching as my fingers slide in and out in that same, slow, perfect pace. She gets fucked enough. Girl needs to just relax into this. I ignore her cries for faster, harder, more, and take my time, loving the fine beads of sweat that cling to her white skin. It’s a cool February evening, but if the sex is good, you always sweat, even just a little.

The couple in the Ford are really going at it now, their voices raised in

pleasure, mixing with the crooning nostalgia of the fifties radio station that Connie started for us. When I feel my own climax sneaking up on me, I adjust my hand, removing one of my fingers from Bernie's pussy and slipping it into her ass.

With a shudder and a soft cry, her inner muscles wrap my fingers, pulsing and throbbing as she comes, spilling more of that sweet juice over my hand as I lick and suck at her clit. My hips pump faster against the seat until I'm coming apart with a desperate, searing relief, like that first hit off a joint, or that first sip of coffee in the morning. My orgasm is like ... falling into bed after a long trip or cracking your knuckles or snorting a line of the purest coke. It's almost as good as falling in love. But not quite.

We stay where we are for a moment, panting and shivering as the cool air brushes across our sweat-soaked skin.

"Jesus, Hael," Bernie murmurs and I chuckle, sitting up and grabbing my discarded shirt again to clean my hand off. I've thoroughly fucked my boxers and honestly, I'm real glad I went with leather for the seats. Have you ever tried to get cum off a fabric seat? Fucking sucks.

I sit up and drag my jeans on with shaking hands, slumping back into the seat as Bernie yanks on her panties and forgoes her pink pants entirely. She curls up against my side as another Connie Francis song starts up.

"This ... was not what I expected from you," she whispers, tucked close to me. I glance back just in time to see a familiar maroon Subaru driving away. Huh. Hadn't even noticed the VGTF assholes joining us on the Butte. Hope they enjoyed the show.

"In a good way?" I ask, feeling my stomach knot as I wait for her answer.

"In the best way," Bernie agrees, and I sigh, my head falling back so I can look up and see the stars. "The absolute fucking best."

And with that, I'm damn near certain that I could die happy.

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

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Bernadette Blackbird

Convincing your five possessive alpha-dick lovers to let you dress up like a whore and raid a gang-owned strip club is one of the hardest things a girl can go through. Frankly, I'm starting to run out of patience here.

"Listen to me," I start as Aaron leans back in his chair at the admittedly cute vintage table in the kitchen. Fifties era, linoleum top, aluminum legs and banding around the edges. Bound to be a classic someday. I might steal it when we leave. Not sure where I'd put it, but I like it. The look Aaron gives me is one-part irritation and two-parts terror. He knows that once I've latched onto something, I'm like a bulldog with a bone. He already knows he's going to lose.

Vic, on the other hand, could use a memo.

"Listen to you talk about an idea that isn't happening?" Victor quips, spraying testosterone in the air like a dragon breathing fire. My mouth tightens, and I feel myself getting all southside pissed off at him. "You're not going into that club. Bernie, did you hear what Callum said? *He* couldn't beat Mason Miller. No offense, but if Cal can't do it then you can't do it. *I* can't do it."

"Not in a one-on-one fight," I argue, standing up from my chair so quickly that it falls over, scratching the already ruined wood floors. This place is a dump, even by Prescott standards. But it's also buried so deeply in our territory that if the GMP were to attack, our people would appear at their own windows, holding sawed-off shotguns and ready to fight. "But I have a plan. I've been talking to Vera, gathering information."

I grab Oscar's iPad, our fingers brushing as I go to take it from him. Our eyes meet and a bolt of ice slashes through my chest, cooling some of my ire but encouraging a whole different sort of fire between my thighs, one that blazes so hot that a bead of sweat trails down between my breasts.

Flipping the cover open, I pull up the map I drew with his stylus this morning, over coffee and doughnuts with Vera. She's actually kind of ... cool? Like, I can see how she became Stacey's BFF. She fucks and discards naughty Prescott boys the way Hael used to plow his way through girls. Her mouth is filthy, but she's sharp as a fucking tack. Loyal, too. Even with Stacey dead and buried, she won't allow anything to taint her friend's

memory.

“This is a map of Kay’s,” I say, noting that Vera scrawled *KKK*ay’s in the corner. Fuck, I hate white supremacists. Nazis and racists and homophobes and sexists and fascists. Gross. But anything to inspire hate and division, am I right? “And this is Mason’s personal room. According to Vera—and a few of Stacey’s other girls—he uses this room every time he goes to the club. Every. Fucking. Time.”

“And your point is?” Victor asks, his massive body leaned up against the countertop, rippling with ink and bullshit and smelling like amber and musk. Even as I hate him, I crave him. Even as I desire to gouge his face with my on-pointe nails, I want to fuck him. He makes me feel in ways I haven’t since my *father* died. “Mason will pick a girl and take her to that room, and if he isn’t stopped, he’ll fuck and torture her. He might even kill her. You’re not taking that risk, Bernie. You might be queen, but I’m still king, and I say no.”

“Do you have a plan?” Callum croaks out, rubbing at his throat. The scab on the front is fading away, but he’s still got stitches—proper ones—in his shoulder and arm. It could’ve been a lot worse for him. If he wasn’t smart enough to know when enough is enough, he wouldn’t be here to crouch on top of the table like a spider monkey, hood pushed back, blond hair bright. “Something other than the obvious one of parading you in front of Mason under the guise of a call girl.”

“I do,” I say carefully, looking over at Hael. He nods and holds out a hand, his other arm crossed over his chest.

“I’m willing to at least listen?” he proposes, shrugging his massive shoulders. Swear to fuck, when I think about him with other women, I get stabby. But damn it if I don’t appreciate his skills. He fucks like somebody who earned a *Hot Piece of Ass* degree from an ivy league university. This guy knows what he’s doing, he’s got the talent and equipment, and he makes his experience work for him.

I shift where I am, feeling my thighs get slick with need. That’s kind of how it is around here, a flurry of sex and violence. It’s just what we do, okay? No need to judge. I know how fucked-up we all are.

“I’ll listen, but I’m not agreeing to anything that puts you in a precarious position,” Aaron adds as I sit down on his lap and he lets out a grunt, palming my hip and letting his fingers get just a tad too close to the fly of my jeans.

“If you’d all shut the fuck up, put your balls back in your boxers for a

minute, and let me talk, you'd understand where I'm coming from." I point at the map again. "It's a near guarantee that Mason will choose a girl and retire to this room—alone. Stacey's girls say he doesn't like to be watched. Mostly, it's because he's into some really sick shit that he doesn't even want his comrades in arms to know about. Everybody in the GMP is afraid of him, apparently. Killing this guy puts us so much closer to dismantling their organization. His fellow gangbangers hate him. He passes judgement too quick and plays judge, jury, and executioner on a regular basis."

Cal pops the top on a Pepsi can with his blue-painted nails and then sits back on his heels, sipping it and alternating handfuls of chocolate covered peanuts while he watches me.

"We all agree that taking down Mason is important, but not with such significant risk to you." Oscar slides the iPad back in his direction, pointing out several other bedrooms on the same upstairs hallway as Mason's. "What if he decides he doesn't want to take you back to his room? What if he decides he wants to use one of these instead? Then what? If you're trapped with him, we might not be able to get to you in time."

"That won't matter because I'm not going into the room with him. Shit, I'm not even asking to play call girl." I lean back against Aaron's chest and he shudders, curving a muscular arm around my midsection. His rose and sandalwood smell drifts around me, bolstering my resolve. "This is what I propose," I start, exhaling as I push back red-tinged blond hair from my face. "Vera has already agreed to help me out. She'll go to Portland and join the girls set to work the reception at Kay's. Once she's in, she'll let us in the back door." I point it out with my new favorite fingernail, the one with the little ring pierced through the tip. "Hael, Aaron, and I will head out to the front to keep an eye on Mason. With so many people in such a dark club, I doubt he'll recognize us. The rest of you"—I point my finger at Cal, Oscar, and Victor—"will set up in the hall and inside Mason's room. Regardless of what girl he picks, he'll come up the stairs and we'll have him alone and surprised. A one-on-one fight isn't necessary. We just need to be slick about it."

"And what if something goes wrong?" Vic inserts, a muscle in his jaw working as his frustration builds. It doesn't bother me. Actually, it sort of turns me on. He's coming from a place of wanting to protect me. Shit, I wouldn't mind if he dragged me to bed and ordered me around under the

sheets, but right here, I'm the HBIC. He needs to back the fuck off. "We're all trapped together *inside* a GMP-owned club with Mason Miller. Sounds like a really great way to end up dead. Only positive I can see is that we all go to the other side together."

I glare at him across the surface of the table. Like I haven't thought about this already? Asshole.

"Listen to me, Mr. Blackbird," I snap back at him, shifting on Aaron's lap and feeling the growing bulge between his thighs. *Good boy. Get it up for me, Fadler.* "And I'll tell you my contingency plan." With a tilt of my chin, I indicate the closed curtains and the police cruiser parked across the street. Half-surveillance, half-protective detail. Gotta hand it to Sara Young, that woman knows how to plot. "I have a contingency plan."

"The feds?" Vic inquires, shaking his head and letting out a long sigh as he closes his eyes. "I know you're not a snitch, so ... color me intrigued." He opens those obsidian eyes for me and smirks. "Lay it out, Mrs. Channing."

Aaron makes a sound of annoyance, tightening the grip of his hand against my hip.

"When Hael and I went to Pussy Point," I say, trying and failing to hide the smile in my voice. He chuckles as he glances my way and our gazes cross. It doesn't take much imagining to remember the hot feel of his hands on my skin, his palm skimming my belly, his head between my thighs. *That tongue, so explosive, so wicked.* "It took the cruiser about seventeen minutes to catch up with us."

Oscar is the first one to get where I'm going with this.

"We use that window of time to kill Mason," he muses as I flick my attention his way. "And if something happens, we have the feds banging down the door to rescue us." An arrogant twist of his lips belies the cool, detached tone of his words. He's impressed with me. Can't even deny it. "This could work, Bernadette."

"Don't sound so surprised," I say as I shift once again on Aaron's lap. This time, he drags me back against him, his breath warm against the side of my neck. "Of course it'll work."

"This still involves putting you in harm's way," Aaron adds, and I glance back to find him watching me. He keeps saying he wants a haircut, but fuck if the sight of a chestnut curl flopping against his forehead doesn't do my ass in. "What if Mason recognizes you? You're not exactly ... an every woman."

I snort at that and shake my head.

“This is where we come back around to the original argument. I won’t be playing a call girl, but to get into that club, I’ll have to dress like one.”

“No.” Vic stands up from the counter and moves over to the table, standing beside Callum where he remains crouched and contemplative. “I’m not letting my wife dress to please Mason cocksucking Miller. You dress in a black hoodie and jeans like the rest of us.”

“Except—as we all know—white supremacist Nazi cocksuckers don’t let women into their ranks. The only women who will be at the club will be strippers and hookers. And Victor, come on, every Prescott girl knows how to don a wig and do some contouring. Nobody will recognize me.”

“Mason might,” Victor corrects, and I roll my eyes. I glance over at Cal for help. Out of all of them, he’s usually on my side.

“Mason *will*,” Callum says, standing up, still perched on top of the table. His head nearly hits the ceiling. If it were a regular eight-foot ceiling, he most definitely would have.

“You don’t know that,” I retort, but if Cal is saying it, he’s probably right. “Regardless, the plan is good, and it’s worth the risk. If we’re going to stay in Springfield ... shit, if we’re going to stay in *Oregon* ... then we need to move. Don’t you want your inheritance? You promised me gifts. And shoes. Lots of fucking shoes. And all the weed I could smoke.”

Of course, Victor knows that I barely care about shoes and pot. What I care about is changing things around here, giving Heather and the girls a strong future, and kicking some GMP ass. This pedo ring they’re running with Ophelia’s help, it stops on my watch. Even if running away would be the safest option for all of us, I can’t do it. I won’t. Not when girls like Alyssa or Penelope or Stacey are preyed on and destroyed, their beautiful and vibrant lights snuffed out by the scum of the earth.

“How do we get Vera into the club in the first place?” Oscar asks, but I just smile. I’ve already figured that out, too. I take the crown that’s sitting on the table, the one that Vic dropped on my bloodied head back at the school, and slip it on.

Of all the things the cops took from me as evidence, I was allowed to keep only this.

Must be fate.

“Guess what I learned from Vera this morning?” I ask, shifting once more

until Aaron grabs me and presses his mouth against the throbbing pulse in the side of my throat. Never underestimate how fun it is to get a man to nut in his fucking pants. Best part is: you can help him strip down and clean up after—then invite his mouth between your thighs.

“Clever little Blackbird,” Hael chuckles, shaking his head. “No need to be so coy. What did you learn from your little hooker friend?”

“For years, one man’s been responsible for supplying Mason with girls, ones that nobody cares about, with no family, ones that society doesn’t care if they live or die.” I exhale and adjust the crown so that it’s sitting straight. I glance back at Aaron again, because I wonder if this might shake him more than the other boys, considering everything he went through.

“Yes?” Oscar prompts, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“Tom Muller,” I say, and Aaron goes completely stiff beneath me—just not in the way I was enjoying a few seconds prior. His hands go still on my hips, his grip tightening until it’s almost painful. Tom threatened to sell him into the sex trade not all that long ago. He’s understandably wary of the guy. “And I know just how to get ahold of him.”

“Shit, shit, shit,” David says, his casual stroll across the Oak Valley Prep campus turning into something of a half-jog as the boys and I close in on him. His brown eyes are wide with fear, a bit of sweat pooling on his upper lip. He’s not bad looking; I can see why I chose him out of a crowd for a one-night stand. But now, having been with all five Havoc Boys, he may as well be a flashlight next to the brilliance of the sun.

“David,” I start, his name both a warning and a placation escaping my red-painted lips. “Slow down, okay? We just want to talk.”

He turns the corner only to run into Aaron.

“Oh, fuck,” David groans, face paling considerably as he slumps back against the brick wall of some fancy-ass building with the name of a rich dead cis-het white guy on the plaque outside the door. “Not you again. I already went out on a limb helping you.”

“Which is why, despite everything your father has done, you are not on our radar,” Aaron tells him, his face darkened with the shadow of ugly memories. It might only have been a few days that he was missing, but it’s left a mark

on him. The threat of rape and death will that to ya. I wonder briefly if we shouldn't get out the handcuffs again and work our way through it as a family ... "But we need your help."

"Look," David starts, wetting his lips, his eyes darting past me as the other boys catch up to us and form a half-circle around the frightened prep school boy. Money can buy a lot of things, but dignity and bravery are not anywhere on the list. "I don't think you quite understand what you're dealing with."

"We know that your father supplies girls for a man named Mason Miller," I retort, and David goes ghost pale. I mean, like me after I spent seven days in the darkness of a closet. Ashen. Sallow. Desperate. He doesn't like this, and I don't blame him. Even by talking to us, he's risking a lot.

"Jesus fucking Christ," David murmurs, reaching up to adjust his blue tie. He's wearing the gray Oak Valley Prep uniform—jacket, slacks, tie. Looks like something from a Japanese anime if you ask me. Or, like this one book I read back in freshman year—*Filthy Rich Boys*. Swear to fuck the author of that was an anime junkie. Bet that's where she got the idea for the uniforms. "You don't want to be messing with Mason Miller, Bernadette."

David and I stare at each other, and I can't help but wonder if he's recalling our relatively basic one-night stand. Kissing, groping, condom on cock, penetration. Bam. That was about it. It was nice, but nothing to write home about.

"Can you not look at her like that?" Aaron growls, his possessive streak making the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. He's sweet and he has a good soul, but I can see it in the way his jaw clenches, the way his eyes narrow ... he wants to kick David's ass for having touched me once upon a time. "Don't think we don't know you once slept with our girl."

"Oh fuck, oh fuck," David murmurs, eyes darting from Aaron to Victor, Callum to Oscar, pausing at Hael before flicking back to me. "Look, I'm like ... a five on the Kinsey scale. I swear, I barely even like girls. I was drunk, and I ... What do you even want from me?"

"We just want to talk to your dad," I tell him, pausing and glancing over my shoulder at the sound of footsteps. Mack Holdman, boyfriend extraordinaire, to the rescue.

"Pardon me, boys," Mack says, shoving his way through the cluster of Havoc Boys like they aren't all at least six inches taller than him and imposing as fuck. "Are you harassing my man, Bernadette Blackbird?"

Because I like you, but I won't if you're back for another round." He gives me a look and then pauses to flip off a passing student. "That's right you homophobic piece of shit, keep walking."

I follow his gaze over to where a very familiar figure waits beneath a tree. Trinity Jade.

"She's a homophobe *and* a royal cunt?" I ask, shaking my head as the emerald green snake of jealousy wraps itself around my throat. If she touches Vic, she's a dead woman. But ... we do also sort of need her help, so the royal ass beating that I owe her will have to wait. "Good to know."

"Her father only donates to political campaigns that emphasize the dismantling of human rights for the LGBT community." Mack pushes some dark hair back from his forehead as he looks from David's sweaty face over to Aaron's deep-set frown. None of the other boys say anything which is probably good. I don't trust Vic to deal with David without trying to kill him. And ... well, let's just say nobody here is a fan of using my hookup as, well, a hookup in a different sense. "Anyway, what can I help you folks with?"

"We need to see Tom," I tell Mack, remembering what Aaron told me about his brief interaction with the couple. Honestly, there's a chance that by giving him a ride against Tom's and Ophelia's wishes, Mack and David inadvertently saved both Aaron's life and my own. No need to tell them that though. Don't need them to think we owe them or anything. "Could you set up a meeting for us? That's all we want."

"Trust me: Blackbird has more than enough dick now. She don't need yours." Hael chuckles and finds the closest *No Smoking* sign before lighting up in a glorious display of irony.

"You want to talk to my dad about Mason Miller?" David clarifies, giving Mack a look. They both—according to them—work for Tom. What, exactly, they do for him I don't want to know. Probably procure girls. If they do, and I find out about it, I'll wish their names were on my list. Instead, I just focus on cutting the head off the zombie, as Hael Harbin might say.

"That's it," Aaron promises, drawing David's attention back toward him. Their gazes meet and something passes between them, a private memory that I can only guess has to do with Tom putting a fucking shotgun to the back of his son's head. "We just want to meet with him. We know he's short on money, too, so we'll make it worth his while."

David adjusts his tie again, clearly uncomfortable with the direction of this

conversation. I catch onto his nervousness and take a step forward, reaching out to put my hand on his upper arm. He flinches, but he lets me touch him.

“How close are you to losing your place here?” I ask, and David’s face pales even further. “What if we made it worth your while, too? Gave you some tuition money?”

“I’m almost twenty-thousand short,” David murmurs as Mack frowns and then drops his attention to where my hand rests on his boyfriend’s arm. He clearly isn’t a fan of me and David sleeping together either. I make sure to drop my hand by my side. “Can you do that?”

Last I checked with Oscar, Havoc had fifty grand in our account. What we have left now, I’m not sure, but probably not a lot. Nobody else is feeding us or buying gas for our cars or paying rent. Nobody else is paying for Heather and Kara and Ashley to enroll here or buying them their expensive uniforms.

“We can do it,” Vic replies easily, no hesitation. I wonder if there are other assets to be liquidated? Or if Havoc, like always, is just good at playing on so many levels that they’ve got extra cash squirreled away in other places. “Twenty for you, twenty for your dad. All *you* have to do is get us a meeting in a public place and make sure he shows up.”

“Done,” David says, eagerness coloring his voice as he looks back at Mack in a way that says he’d do anything to stay here with his man. Hey, I get it. I’d do the same: attend this horrid prep school for Vic just so he can get his diploma. Love is never easy, is it? There’s a bit of a pause before he adds, “are you planning on killing him?”

“If we were ...?” Aaron starts as Vic makes a choking laugh that causes goose bumps to rise on both of my arms.

“I’d say ... karma?” David suggests, face darkening as I think about what Aaron told me, how David basically admitted to being abused by his father. And then Victor with Ophelia. Penelope and the Kushners via Pam and Neil. Everything is connected. My list, my revenge, my boys, this city. The world is nothing if not a dangerous web. Pluck the wrong strand and the spider finds you before you get a chance to untangle yourself. “Anyway, just ... be cautious. Ophelia broke up with him and moved out last week. He’d been planning on marrying her, too, so ... he’s a little salty.” David swallows a lump in his throat, letting me know that Tom’s idea of saltiness is a bit more extreme than some bitter remarks and a deep-set frown.

“Ophelia broke up with him, huh?” Vic asks, rubbing at his chin.

“Interesting. That must mean she has a much better prospect in mind. Say, Maxwell Barrasso?”

“Oh, they’re fucking for sure,” Mack agrees, giving Vic an appreciative once-over and then flicking his eyes over to me as if to say *just lookin’, girl*. “Ophelia met Maxwell through Tom and it’s been downhill ever since.”

“Aw, poor baby,” Vic murmurs, lighting up another cigarette. “So, he’s broke and dumped both, huh? You think he’ll agree to meet with us—even with the risk of the GMP?”

“He’ll do it,” David says, eyeing me skeptically, like he wonders what the hell I’m up to with this crew. Or maybe he’s just wondering why he ever agreed to hook up with me, considering I’ve been a Havoc Girl in my heart all along. “He needs the money too badly to say no.”

Victor nods again and then digs a card out of his pocket that he passes over to David.

“He meets us here, or it’s no deal. He’s also got a three-minute window of time in which to show up. If he’s late, we’ll kill him. Understood?”

David nods at Vic’s harsh words, plastering his body against the wall as Mack strokes his arm in solidarity.

“Boys,” Vic says, nodding with his head in Trinity’s direction. “Wife?” Victor offers me his arm, and I take it, allowing him to lead me away from David and Mack and toward his faux fiancée—a spot that I once held before becoming his wife. But Trinity will be nothing near what I was to Victor. The closest she’ll ever come to him touching her is if he’s forced to wrap his hands around her throat.

Trinity stays where she is, watching us from beneath the leafless limbs of a maple tree, her arms crossed over the front of her jacket, her gold hair billowing in the breeze. Victor and I approach her together, like a couple. Like it always should’ve been. Her eyes spot the ring on my finger right away.

“Well, looks like you really are stupid enough to decline your mother’s offer.”

“Bitch, listen up,” I start, swinging right out the gate as Victor laughs beside me, his chuckles low and sensuous and dark. “We know about you and James. Namely, the fact that you and James are half-siblings through Maxwell Barrasso. Oh, and the fact that your shared lineage didn’t stop you from riding his dick.”

Trinity blinks at me, maintaining that ineffable calm of hers. According to Vic, she seemed pretty shaken up about James' death. Looking at her now, you'd never know.

"Do you have a point?" she asks, rearing back slightly to look me over with a sneer building on her lips. It's like ... Trinity is Kali without the ratchet, but with an extra helping of smug superiority. But where Kali had a rotten soul, at least she had one. Pretty sure Trinity Jade is an empty trinket on the inside. "Why are you even here?"

"We came here to enroll, of course," Victor says, and I shiver in pleasure as Trinity's face pales, going ashen beneath the pretty layer of makeup she's caked on her doll-like features. "Oh? You seem shocked," he continues, reaching out a single finger to lift her tie. There's a cruelty to his movements, to the set of his gaze, that I've never seen directed at me. It's the look that promises the Vic who strangled Logan Charter to death in the hallways of Prescott High still exists.

He's very dangerous, Victor Channing is.

I reach up and take his arm, and he grins, standing up straight and shrugging his big shoulders. A master of control.

"Oak Valley has opened up a dozen spots for students from Prescott High, in a show of solidarity—a dozen *scholarship* spots. We've got a few ... on-campus connections, so it looks like we'll be starting next week." Vic gets out a cigarette and lights up, his gaze sliding over to me. "And by we, I mean me and my wife. My boys." He flicks his attention back to Trinity as she stands there clutching her leather book bag and struggling to keep her expression placid.

"You'll be dead before you can set foot in your first class," Trinity deadpans, not bothering to hide the menace in her words. "Maxwell will see to that, after what you did to James." Her face cracks for the briefest of moments, and I smile. I wonder if she'd like to know how her brother met his end? On the floor of my cheap, dirty high school with a rock to the head. No eyes. And blood. So, so much blood.

"No," Vic says, chuckling and shaking his head as the tree branch above Trinity's head creaks and she looks up to see Cal crouching there, staring down at her. Victor takes another step forward, grabbing the end of Trinity's tie and twirling it around her neck like a noose. He tugs the end of it and grins. "Because you're going to go back to Ophelia and tell her that our

engagement is still on. You're going to get that judge grandfather of yours to promise that the annulment is complete."

"I'm not afraid of you," she retorts, her eyes blazing. I can't decide if she's just pissed off or pissed off *and* turned-on. I know where I stand as I reach out and snag the loose cig dangling from Vic's lips. I smoke it while he leans in toward Trinity and puts his forehead so close to hers that she squeezes her eyes shut.

"You should be. Every person in our crew knows about you and James. If you want to keep rich daddy Jade from discovering that you aren't his brat, that your mom is a whore, and that you've got no part of his pretty royal blood ... Well, then, that's your choice." Vic releases her tie suddenly and stands up.

Trinity's eyes trail over to me, meeting my green gaze with a dark one of her own.

"Do it, Trinity Jade," Vic continues, cupping the side of her face in a way that makes me shift with jealousy, leather pants creaking as I pop out a hip and stare Trinity down. "We don't want to have to kill you." He taps her cheek and steps back, nodding over at Oscar briefly. "Let Maxwell know that if he doesn't reaccept Ophelia's original offer, we'll start dismantling his organization from the top down."

Vic takes another step back and then turns, gesturing for the rest of us to follow.

"You sure you want to do this?" he asks, gazing down at me. I look back at him before nodding. The idea of continuing the charade was mine. But this time, we have the same dirt on Trinity that Ophelia has. A stalemate, if you will. For now, this buys us time.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see that Trinity's already stormed off, disappearing between two of the old stone buildings with her skirt ruffling around her thighs. I need to see the girls today—I feel like I might die if I don't—but we also need to make sure as few people see us interacting with them as possible. They're supposed to be incognito here. Heather is not Heather today: she's *Hannah*.

"I'm sure," I say, popping a fresh piece of bubblegum between my lips as Aaron catches up to my left side. Hael, Oscar, and Cal trail just behind us. Even here, on the grounds of Oak Valley Prep, people get the fuck out of our way when we're walking. "I've got some ideas of how to handle your

engagement on campus.”

Vic grins at me, wrapping his arm over my shoulders and pressing his lips against my hair.

“Whatever her majesty wishes,” he tells me as the spoiled brats of Oak Valley Prep watch us pass through the courtyard, heading in the direction of the elementary school. “Anything. The world. The sun. I’ll lasso the fucking moon.” He pulls away from me, folding his hands together behind his head as I try not to marvel at the idea of Victor motherfucking Channing quoting the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

If I were the type of girl that swooned then I might ...

But ew.

Fucking no. Gross.

“Bernie!” Heather shouts as I pass under another ivy-covered gate with the words *Oak River* across the top. She throws herself into my arms, and I spin, like some bitch in a movie with a happy ending. Somehow, even as confident as I am in Havoc, I’m worried. Like I said, life definitely doesn’t make narrative sense. “Remember to call me Hannah,” she whispers conspiratorially, glaring at Victor over my shoulder before I set her down to join in Kara and Ashley’s hug-fest on Aaron’s legs.

“Boy Scout motherfucker,” Vic grumbles, keeping his distance. Oscar does the same, waiting beside him, while Hael and Callum have no problem greeting the little girls. It’s not like they don’t care or can’t show affection though. In our last phone call, Heather told me how she sometimes catches Oscar peeping in to check on them. She says his eyes sweep the shadows of the room like a hawk, that he drives away all the monsters. And Vic ... don’t think I didn’t notice how Ashley threw herself at him when she was initially frightened of me.

“Bernadette!” Kara squeals, giving me a hug next and clinging to me so tight that for a moment there, I can’t breathe. I’d take that sort of death though, death by drowning in a little girl’s affections. They have no ulterior motives, little kids. That’s what makes them so much better than adults.

Surprisingly, a moment later, Ashley approaches in her little uniform and gives me a hug, too. It’s the first I’ve gotten from her. If I were the sort of bitch who teared up at that kind of thing ...

“You’re staying here for real?” Heather asks, glancing between me and Aaron. “Everything is so nice. They serve drinks with ice and straws in the

cafeteria.”

“It’s for real,” Aaron promises, palming the side of her head. I remember the way Penelope used to look at me and him together, like we were exactly where we were supposed to be. She always liked Aaron. And so does Heather.

“Do you still ship me and Bernie?” Cal asks Ashley, leaning down and putting his palms on his knees. He smiles at her and even chuckles when she pushes his hood back, revealing his blond hair to the world. Several high school girls actually pause on their way past to look at him.

Ashley nods and then reaches out a finger to touch the healing gash in the front of his throat. It doesn’t look nearly as gruesome as it did the first day. Eventually, it’ll disappear into the sea of white slash marks that already decorate his pale skin. I appreciate each one for what it is, a piece of Callum’s past, a shred of his trauma. Then, at night, I can kiss it all away, flick it aside with the hot brush of my tongue.

“What happened?” she asks as Cal stands up, blue eyes sliding over to mine.

“Just an accident,” he says, rubbing his throat as he looks at me. I have to actually tear my gaze away because I know what he’s thinking about. Mason Miller. The funeral for James Barrasso is in just four days. If something goes wrong there, it could go really wrong ... But if it goes right? We’re just one step closer to the end of this shit.

“Starting Monday,” Aaron is telling Kara, pointing behind us and in the direction of the high school dorms. “We’ll be right there.” He kneels down and presses a new cell phone case into his sister’s hand, one with sparkles and glitter and little kitty charms. “If you need us, you know what to do.”

“Text or call and say ‘mare’s nest’,” Kara declares proudly, and Aaron nods, pressing a kiss against her forehead.

“Good girl,” he says, rising up to his full height. The way he studies the kids, it’s like he’s memorizing their faces—just in case. *Fuck*. I swipe a hand over my own face as he glances my way, meeting my eyes with a strange mixture of despair and hope. If this all works out, we’ll be set for life. If it doesn’t ... well, we may not have any lives at all.

The sound of church bells tolling signals the end of the lunch period and Heather starts to bounce on her toes. She’s always been a stickler for rules. So, like, pretty much the exact opposite of me.

“The bells mean we have to go,” she starts, glancing over her shoulder before looking back at me. “But ... I really like it here, Bernie.” I smile and bend down for another hug, letting her squeeze me as tightly as she wants. Like I said, you never know how precious a hug is until you can’t hold the person you love anymore. “Thank you for sending me here.” Heather releases me and starts to move away, pausing at the last second before glancing back at me. “Can we go see Penelope’s grave soon? I want to tell her I love her.”

My throat closes up, but I force myself to rise to my feet, nodding when I find that it’s become almost impossible to speak.

“We’ll go,” Aaron answers for me, reaching down to take my hand and curling his fingers through mine. “I promise.”

With another wave, Heather takes off, catching up to Kara and Ashley as they disappear inside of another ivy-covered brick building. Sending them here was the right choice, one that we made just in time. Who knows what the GMP might’ve done if we hadn’t removed the girls from their reach?

“Are you okay?” Aaron asks me, but I just turn and let him fold me into his arms.

“I’m okay,” I reply, nuzzling into that special place between his neck and shoulder, feeling his warmth blaze through me. “But I’ll be much better after we kick Mason Miller’s ass.”

He threads his fingers through my hair, presses a kiss against my forehead, and then leads me across the campus of what’s soon to be our new school.

From Prescott Senior High to Oak Valley Preparatory Academy.

Night and day.

At the very least, it’ll be an interesting social experiment. At best, it’s the start of a whole new motherfucking life.

For all of us.

For our fucked-up little Havoc family.

Tom Muller is the same sleazy-ass salesman who leered at me during that very first breakfast meeting with Ophelia. That was also the same day that Victor practically gave me an orgasm under the table and then chased me into the upstairs bathroom to finish the job.

Tom Muller is also the fucker who stabbed a shotgun into Aaron’s crotch

and threatened to sell him to perverts—oh, and all of that right after he aimed a gun at his son’s head, a son that he either abused himself or allowed his fucked-up friends to abuse. Maybe even collected money for the privilege.

I’m scowling already, but Aaron is shaking with fury. The first thing he does is slip up behind Tom like a shadow and slam his palm into the surface of the countertop where the fucker’s nursing what looks like his third drink of the night. Tom startles violently, dark eyes flicking over to Aaron before drifting back to the rest of us.

“Hello asshole,” Aaron hisses out, curling the fingers of his other hand around the back of Tom’s neck. He looks about *this* fucking close to slamming the older man’s head down as hard as he can, just to see if he can’t crack his skull.

“I’ve got a protective detail,” Tom blurts, gesturing with his beer and spilling a good portion of it across the pink laminate surface. We’re inside Wesley’s, our usual drive-in haunt, the one that sits across the tracks from the Fuller High drive-in. During freshman year, my boys—before they were the Havoc Boys—would come here to toss Molotov cocktails into the backseats of the Fuller football team’s cars.

Aww, nostalgia.

Too bad none of that will help Tom any.

“What’s your point?” Victor adds, sliding in on Tom’s other side. “Do you think we care? That we couldn’t kill you and make it look like an accident?”

“Besides,” Aaron adds, blending his voice into Victor’s in a way that just comes too naturally to be faked. They might disagree a lot, and they might fight over me a bit, but they love each other regardless. They’re family. They were always meant to be family. “That’s not a protective detail, you moron. They’re fucking tailing you.”

Aaron releases Tom roughly enough that the asshole splashes his drink all over his lap. Aaron takes the stool on Tom’s right while Victor occupies the one on his left.

Behind me, Hael, Oscar, and Callum grab a table, and I join them, sitting on the side closest to Tom so that I can hear and see everything. My eyes scan the room, but there aren’t a ton of people in here right now. The few patrons still milling about are either well-trained Prescott High kids who know better than to bother us, or crew members.

“Remember when I told you that you’d die choking on blood?” Aaron asks

casually, ordering a strawberry milkshake and managing to look like a total asshole as he slides the metal straw between his lips. “You are *this* close to realizing that fate.”

“What do you want from me?” Tom snarls, looking like a kicked street dog with its teeth bared. He thought he had the upper hand with Aaron tied up in his cabin. And now? Even Ophelia has betrayed his ass.

“Bet ya twenty bucks that he asks for cash up-front,” Hael murmurs, sipping a vanilla shake and watching the exchange over the rim of his metal cup. Cal has one elbow leaned on the surface of the table, head resting in his hand as he snacks on a basket of fries. Meanwhile, Oscar is on his iPad, acting like he’s not a part of this conversation when, in reality, he’s the one who told Aaron and Vic exactly what to say in the first place. “Right now. Today. Bet he says it just like that, too.”

“You shouldn’t be making anymore bets,” I tell him, flicking my gaze in his direction. He flashes a sharp grin at me because he knows exactly what I’m thinking about. Us. The Eldorado. Our oral sex bets ... “Not when you’ve just finally paid yours back.”

“But I *did* pay you back—and it was epic,” Hael starts, leaning toward me and flashing one of his signature cocksure grins. “Bet you didn’t expect the ass play part though, huh?”

I give him a look as Cal chuckles and Oscar finally lifts his eyes from the screen of the iPad.

“Ass play?” he queries, in such a mild way that I know he’s immediately fascinated by the idea.

“Dude, you don’t get to take credit for the ass play when I was the one that shoved my finger up your ass first.” I quirk a brow to emphasize my point.

Hael roars with laughter, interrupting Aaron and Vic’s conversation with Tom. Both of my boys glance back at us, wearing similarly wry smiles.

“I didn’t come here to listen to your whore talk about anal,” Tom growls, and then Aaron is grabbing the man by his hair and wrenching him off the stool. The elderly owners of Wesley’s—those poor parents who lost their Prescott High alumnus son once upon a time—act like they don’t see any of this happening.

Even the adults in the Prescott neighborhood know who we are. Eventually, every person in this city will know. That, or they’ll remain blissfully ignorant because they walk in the light and have no need to see us

creeping through the shadows.

Aaron shoves Tom to his knees and, at a subtle nod from Vic, removes a pistol from his belt. He presses it up against the side of Tom's head. There are no cameras here, and we have—I glance at my phone—about nine minutes left before the cops catch up to us.

“Call my girl a whore again,” Aaron says, his face hard, his green-gold eyes honed-in on his prey. “I’ll wait.”

“What do you want from me?!” Tom wails, sounding frustrated and broken and sad. To be quite frank: I couldn’t give any fucks less how the bastard feels. He sells girls. He abuses his son. He was in love with *Ophelia Mars*, of all people.

“All we need you to do is include one of our girls in the group you’re sending to Kay’s on Friday. That’s it.” Vic leans in close, and I swear I can hear him growling under his breath. “And don’t you fucking *dare* ask me something asinine like *and why should I?* If you do, I might lose my shit and decide to shove the broken pieces of that beer bottle down your throat.”

“Send your girls to Kay’s?” Tom repeats, blinking stupidly in Vic’s direction before flicking his eyes up to Aaron’s face. He must know how close my lover is to pulling that trigger, just for the hell of it, and immediately softens his approach. “The GMP will kill me. I can’t betray them. And you shouldn’t either, not if you want to finish up high school.”

Aaron puts the gun away and then bends down beside Tom.

“I think the problem here is, you’re acting as if we *asked* you to send one of our girls in the group. Let me rephrase it so that you can understand: you *will* send one of our girls. Nobody has to know about it. Even the GMP won’t know what’s happening.”

“Mason will,” Tom chokes out as I check my phone yet again. We have six minutes left. Fuck.

“Six minutes, Aaron,” I warn, and he curses. We need Tom to get the fuck out of here before our police escort shows up. *His* police escort was left back at a café in town where one of our crew members shoved Tom out the restroom window and drove him here to meet us. The clock is ticking on that, too.

“Fuck Mason,” Aaron growls, yanking Tom’s head around by his hair yet again. “And fuck you. I already said I wasn’t asking. You’ll do it. Give us the details on where to send our girl.”

“Give me the money you promised,” Tom snarls, but he doesn’t resist Aaron’s grip on his greasy slicked-back hair. “I want cash right now, up-front.”

Hael snorts, and I give him a look. Shit, well, I guess he was right.

“Our crew member will give you half back at the café. The rest you’ll get after it’s done. Do we understand each other?”

Tom says nothing and Aaron gives him a little shake for emphasis, leaning in to hiss in his ear.

“If you fuck this up, we *will* kill you.”

“Mason will likely get me first,” Tom mumbles, but Aaron just shakes his head, releasing Tom and rising to his feet.

“We’re out of time.” Aaron grabs the pen and paper off the counter—a guest check pad he charmed out of one of the waitresses—and tosses it onto the floor next to Tom. “Details and quick.”

With another scowl, Tom scratches a number, a name, and an address on the pad and then chucks it at Aaron’s feet.

“Alright, up.” Victor grabs Tom by the back of the shirt and hauls him over to the side door, shoving him outside on the pavement where two boys in black hoodies and skeleton masks wait. They take Tom by either arm and manhandle him into the backseat of a ’75 Buick Riviera—according to Hael—and take off.

Two minutes later, our favorite police cruiser pulls into the parking lot to find us seated at the table together, sipping shakes and eating burgers. I’m sure they’re pretty pissed off by now that we keep giving them the slip, but that’s what happens when you chase a snake in its own burrow. We know exactly where we’re going and what we’re doing.

“Sara isn’t going to like this,” I say, stealing one of Cal’s fries and swiping it through a puddle of ketchup that looks like blood. “Us giving her the slip all the time.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing?” Aaron suggests, breathing just a bit harder than he normally would, wound-up on adrenaline and rage. “Next time we take off, it’ll be for Kay’s, and then maybe she’ll come looking for us herself? Just in case something happens, I’d rather have the VGTF than the SPD at my back.”

“Can we actually go back to discussing ass play?” Callum suggests mildly, and Vic darts his ebon—*ebon, ebon, ebon*—gaze over to him. Yeah, I’m a

snarky bitch. Yeah, I bring up politics a lot. Yeah, I have personal vendettas and blah, blah, blah, but if you didn't catch onto that from the beginning then there isn't much hope left, is there?

"You didn't tell me you played with each other's asses at Pussy Point," Victor says, almost accusingly, and Hael gives him a sharp look.

"Do we have to tell you everything?" he queries, and I sense the tension between the two of them right away. We need to hash out our shit *now*. There isn't any time left to play games. "Are you and Bernadette the 'primaries' in this polyamorous relationship?"

"The fuck is a primary?" Victor shoots back, taking a flask out of his pocket and spiking his soda.

"A primary is like ... the main person in your relationship, even if you're with other people," I explain, and Vic grins. I cut him off before he can stick his giant ass foot in his stupid ass mouth. "But no, you are not my primary. I don't *have* a primary." I look over at Aaron for a moment before switching my gaze to Oscar. "You're all equal to me."

"What you're saying is," Cal starts, lifting the empty basket of fries up as the waitress tentatively approaches our table. She takes the hint and scurries off to get another order—on the house, of course. "We don't *have* to tell each other anything ... but maybe we should try to be open?"

I give Hael a look and he curses, swiping his fingers through his bloodred hair.

"Alright, alright." He turns in his seat to face Vic and exhales sharply. "Okay, I'm super pissed at you for having a threesome with Aaron when you kicked my ass out."

Aaron snorts, but he doesn't say anything, using the metal straw to stir his shake as I look between Hael and Victor.

"Whoa there, Harbin," Vic starts, leaning back in his chair and crossing his hands over his belly. "I didn't know you gave a shit."

"You knew," Hael corrects, giving his friend a sharp look. "You just didn't care. I appreciate you saying you'd share Bernadette with the rest of us, but I need you to ..." Hael gestures randomly and then sighs, glancing over at Callum for help. Oscar finally closes the cover on his iPad and sets it aside. Guess he doesn't need to make any notes on ass play or the delicate dance of threesomes. "I need you to admit that you're not sharing her at all, that she has just as much of a right to any of us as we have to her. That's what I want

to hear.”

Victor thinks on that for a moment, giving a long, slow blink as he processes the information.

Eventually, he just gets up and goes outside, letting the glass front door of the drive-in slam shut behind him.

Hael sighs, but he doesn't seem particularly displeased.

“He'll come around,” he says, nodding and leaning back in his chair. The waitress approaches like a timid mouse and practically chucks the fries on the table before fleeing yet again. Aaron watches her go with something akin to sympathy, like he knows his liberal use of the pistol is part of what has her so goddamn terrified. “He will. He just has to let it percolate for a bit.”

“You have more faith in him than I do, apparently,” Oscar drawls, staring down at the basket of fries like he'd very much enjoy having one or two or seven. It occurs to me then that maybe he has an eating disorder of some sort. Callum seems to agree with that sentiment, pushing the fries directly in front of his friend and then sitting back in his chair.

“Remember that ‘sleeping schedule’ that Vic wanted to make?” Cal begins, letting his blue eyes swing over to me. “And that you said *you* would make?”

“Yeah?” I ask, wondering where he's going with this. He reaches out and runs a single, blue-nailed finger down the bridge of my nose. I swat him away, but I'm not entirely displeased. My mouth twitches and I reach out to steal Aaron's shake. He lets me grab hold of it and then, at the last second, ends up yanking me into his lap.

“Well, I'd just as soon stay with you every night,” Cal continues, parking his chin in his hand and letting his gaze slide over to Oscar. “Pretty sure O feels the same way.”

“I'd like to have a bed of my own, in our future permanent dwelling,” Oscar says, and then finally, as if he just can't fucking take it anymore, he reaches out and snags a French fry. The look on that motherfucker's face when he puts it in his mouth reminds me a bit of his orgasm face. My lips twitch as I bring Aaron's shake to my mouth and suck on the straw. “But I also wouldn't mind having something of a master bedroom.”

“So you've thought about it?” Aaron asks, amusement clear in his voice. “What it would be like to have a house together?”

Oscar looks up at him, the light catching on the lenses on his glasses.

“Of course I have. Actually, Victor's already asked me to purchase his

grandmother's old property in the name of a trust. Don't act so surprised: where else could we live but together?" Oscar dips a second fry in the ketchup and slips it into that sharp mouth of his, closing his eyes for a moment while he chews. He opens them again and stares Aaron down. "We're going to need a fortress, similar to the one Maxwell Barrasso lives in now. Fortunately, with Victor's inheritance, we'll have plenty of money to invest in a place."

A shiver passes through me, one that Aaron feels as he wraps his strong arms around me and parks his chin on my shoulder.

"We could each have our own rooms, but yeah, a master bedroom of sorts for ... orgies or whatever," Aaron muses and I chuckle.

"Oh, I see how it is: we're planning on orgies already?" I glance over at him, finding his beautiful eyes on mine. "We haven't even ... well, I wouldn't call y'all running a train on me an orgy."

"Running a train," Hael repeats, snorting. "Is that what we did, Bernadette Blackbird?"

"If it walks like a duck ..." I start, shrugging my shoulders and then pausing as Victor comes back into the restaurant.

"We should go," he says, glancing over at Hael for a moment. In his eyes, I can see that Hael is right: something is percolating. Victor is all about family. All he's ever wanted is this, the six of us together. All of the squabbling and the bickering and the arguing, none of that really matters. *His grandmother's property ... all of us living together.* For as deeply entrenched in hell as we are, that sounds an awful lot like heaven. "We could all use some sleep; we've got a big weekend ahead of us."

"And an even bigger week," I murmur as I rise to my feet.

On Friday, we take down Mason Miller.

On Monday, we start at Oak Valley Prep.

Not sure which of those two things is going to be more difficult; my opinion is that it'll be the latter that really gets us. Prescott trash at Oak Valley. Gods help us all.

We'll infect it like a poison, but honestly, I bet the place is better off for it.

The type of poison that Havoc bestows is the kind that tastes oh so very sweet indeed.

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CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

We make the two-hour drive to Portland in the Eldorado and the Camaro, with Vic riding his Harley. As per usual, as soon as we take off down the street, the police cruiser follows.

“You sure you’re alright to drive?” Aaron asks as I depress the clutch and get us lurching down the street. But it only takes me a second to recall the warmth of Hael’s hand and the gently murmured instructions from our driving lesson. It isn’t so hard as everyone makes it out to be.

“I got this,” I tell him, following our carefully planned route, one that uses the shortcut at the racetrack to buy us a few extra minutes. After a half-dozen practice runs, we can pretty much count on seventeen minutes before the cop car catches up to us.

Seventeen minutes to kill the second-in-command of the Grand Murder Party.

We must be fucking insane.

“Are you sure *you’re* okay to not be wearing your medical boot?” I shoot back, and he grimaces slightly, like he knows he’s been caught doing something he shouldn’t. But that grimace, that cringing, that *who me?* look is what makes him so goddamn sexy. “We all take risks for the betterment of Havoc, I suppose.”

“Yeah, well,” Aaron starts with a small laugh, leaning back in the seat and running his palm over the leather, like he’s as impressed with Hael Harbin as

I am. “Pretty sure that boot would give me away. I know we haven’t talked much about what, exactly, happened during the shooting but—”

“You beat a guy to death with a metal trash can?” I interrupt, and Aaron snorts at me.

“Okay, well, yeah, there is that.” He glances my way, studying the beautiful red wig I’m wearing with interest. Makes me wonder if we can’t incorporate something like this into our sex life. What is it that Megan Thee Stallion says in “WAP”? Switch my wig and make him feel like he’s cheating? Yep, something like that. Since I’d rather gouge my own eyes out with a spoon than share my men, I could spice things up with a wig every now and again. “One of the shooters that came into my bio class got away. He most definitely saw the boot. I figured I’d rather risk reinjuring it than getting caught.”

“Probably a smart choice,” I agree reluctantly, flexing my fingers around the steering wheel as I follow Hael in the Camaro, Victor trailing behind us. Cal and Oscar are with Hael, giving me and Aaron a moment to be alone. I can sense that he’s still watching me, taking in the lacey glove on my left hand—can’t exactly walk into a rival club with the word *HAVOC* inked onto my knuckles—and the way-too-short skirt with the garters underneath.

“If something goes wrong tonight, I just want you to know that even if I would’ve preferred it if you left Springfield altogether ... I don’t regret the time we’ve spent together.”

“Don’t be so fatalistic,” I snort, but Aaron’s got a point. If this works, it’ll be quick, painless, easy. If it doesn’t ... well, I’ve gotten used to living on the edge of a knife. Lately, that’s all we’ve been doing. If this works out though, we’re likely to get a few months of downtime. Maxwell will see that Havoc is truly a threat, that he isn’t so invincible as he thinks. With Trinity working the faux fiancée angle, Ophelia tamed, Maxwell mollified by the promise of a big cash influx, we might actually get to finish out our senior year with little disturbance.

“Well, I’m trying not to be,” Aaron says with one of those sexy boy next door grins, the ones that are floppy and sweet and completely irresistible. I like it even better because it’s paired with ink and a ruthless need to protect, to save, to shelter. He broke his fucking hand to get back to me. He killed a man in the woods with no weapon of his own. He took care of Kali when I failed to do it myself. “I like being with you too much to die yet. Besides,

after hearing all this ass play crap, I feel like I'm missing out."

"Oh my god, shut up." I smack him with my right hand, keeping my gloved left one firmly attached to the wheel. Hael speeds up and takes a corner so tight that he cuts across the edge of someone's lawn; I make sure to follow along exactly. There's no room for error here. We have to stay together, and we have to outrun our little copper friends. "Remember the first time we tried anal?"

"I try not to," Aaron says, but there's a warmth in his voice that tells me he doesn't care that we were fumbling, inexperienced idiots. It was still fun, I'll admit it. But it was also *way* more intimate than I'd expected. I remember looking up at him and seeing this expression of bliss and wonder on his face. "Remember when Kali tried to tell you that anal sex didn't count as sex?"

I laugh my ass off at that one; I'd forgotten she'd ever said that. How goddamn stupid. Anyone that says anal sex isn't sex needs to have their fucking head examined.

"Do you ..." I start as we near the racetrack and I see Aaron's eyes flick to the windshield. He takes in the quiet night and the muddy stretch of track with a slight grimace. Poor Aaron. He's had it rough lately. Crashing the Camaro, having the shit beat out of him, getting hit with Kali's car. Tom stabbing him in the dick with the shotgun, breaking his hand, having to kill a girl we've been going to school with for a decade. He deserves a break. "Do you still think about her?"

Aaron's quiet for a moment, almost like he's holding his breath as we fly onto the track and then up the hidden side road. Glancing in my rearview, the only person I see behind me is Vic on his bike. No cops. Good. Eventually, this trick isn't going to work anymore. But that's okay. It just needs to last one more time, one final night.

"More often than I'd like," he finally says, after we've emerged onto the suburban street and turned right at the next stop sign. The exit for the highway isn't far off. From there, it's about a two-hour drive without traffic. In traffic ... fuck, it takes forever. This area was never meant to have so many people living in it. I just wish all the out-of-state transplants would fuck off and find somewhere else to live. Yeah, I'm that salty about it.

"Maybe we should use the handcuffs again?" I hazard, hoping that I'm not about to set off a PTSD trigger or anything. Aaron takes off his seat belt and scoots closer to me, making me wonder why every car doesn't have a bench

seat in the front. It's sort of, like, optimal for cuddling or whatever. Totally new concept for me, but I'm embracing it.

"If you want to use handcuffs, Bernadette Blackbird, then we'll use handcuffs, but not for my benefit. I'm okay, really." I flick a quick glance in Aaron's direction, but he puts a single inked finger up and pushes my face away, turning my eyes back to the road. "If you've been worried about me, don't be. Obviously, what happened with Kali wasn't ideal, but it had to happen. She was on your list. She was dealt with. I don't take pleasure in it, but she isn't appearing to me in ghost form." He smiles to soften the blow of that, but it doesn't bother me. I'm over that now.

"Hey, I promised to be a Havoc Girl, but I never promised that I was sane." I turn my blinker on, rocketing onto the highway behind the Camaro.

Aaron's nice-boy smile turns a bit naughtier and he leans in, pressing his lips against the side of my throat. When he puts his hand on my thigh, I decide that we're not going to make it to Portland alive if he keeps touching me. Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it—he draws his hand away and sits back.

"Nobody in our family is sane, Bernie. That's why we work so well together." Aaron turns up the music—"*Determined*" by Mudvayne—and then threads his fingers together behind his neck, closing his eyes against the rush of farmland on either side of the highway.

We make record time, pulling into a disturbingly dark parking lot outside of some industrial shitbox with the word *Kay's* written in neon pink lighting across the front. Looks exactly like the type of place I've gone out of my way to avoid in life. This is the sort of establishment that girls go into and they don't come out of. Or, if they do, they don't come out the same person that they were when they went in.

I turn the engine off and, with one last look at Aaron, I open the door and climb out.

We have seventeen minutes. That's it. There's no time to dawdle.

"Set the timers on your phone," Vic commands, hopping off the Harley and hooking his helmet over the handlebars. He's dressed in a black hoodie and jeans, just like the rest of the boys. But Hael and Aaron are the only two wearing black fingerless skeleton gloves on their left hands. Even fingerless, the gloves cover up to the first knuckle, hiding that deliciously dark acronym from view. "Bernadette, call my phone and leave the line open; I want to hear

everything that you're doing in there."

"Got it," I say, pausing beside Oscar near the back entrance to the club. There are a few dumpsters out here, a wash of graffiti which includes that horrid silhouette of a clown face, but little else. It's so fucking creepy. Apparently, this place used to be a bank once upon a time. According to Vera, there are old vaults in here that make up some of the rooms. The doors have all been turned *inward*, making them nearly impenetrable.

I text Vera as Hael and Callum do a quick check of the parking lot. *Here, girl*. That's all I send, just in case the feds get another warrant to take our new phones. Not that it really matters. Even if Sara and Constantine figure out we were here, they'll never know why. It's not like the GMP is going to report Mason's murder.

The underground operates within its own set of fucked-up rules.

Leaning my shoulder against the wall of the club, I can feel the pulse of the music from inside, a dirty heartbeat that speaks to the underbelly of the city, beckoning forth its darkest denizens. I make sure to keep my eyes on my phone, pretending to scroll as I wait for Vera to unlock the door from the other side.

If someone stumbles on me, they'll think I'm a stripper or a hooker. Either way, I likely won't be shot on sight the way the boys might.

Coming, Vera texts, and less than a minute later, I hear the sound of a chain-lock being removed, the metallic swish of a deadbolt. The door cracks open and within seconds, I'm surrounded by a sea of male shadows, pushing me forward and inside. Just me and a cloud of Havoc, baby.

"Be careful," Vera hisses, reaching out to grab my arm with her pink-nailed hand. "Mason is edgy tonight." She has to shout to be heard over the music, but I consider what she has to say, nodding before I slip down the hall with Hael and Aaron trailing behind me. "Grab a bottle of liquor and start pouring. Any girl that isn't dancing or fucking is makin' drinks." Vera peels away from me, heading for the stage at the front of the room.

It's hard to see in the dirty shadows of the club, but it's clear that there's someone sitting in the frontmost booth, the crest of his head barely visible above the back of the blue cushion. I straighten out the black miniskirt I'm wearing and turn to face my boys. They're both hyper-alert, eyes darting around the club to take in any possible threats, cataloguing the exits.

Glancing down at my phone, I see that two minutes have already passed

since we got here. Jesus fucking Christ, this is going to be tight. Shit, it might not work at all. Mason might not pick a girl, or he might decide that today of all days is going to be one where he takes an hour before selecting one.

Then what?

Will I snitch to the fucking feds to keep a girl safe from Mason's perverted hands?

The answer to that question scares the shit out of me.

I know I would.

I seriously fucking would.

Forcing Aaron and Hael into a booth near the bar, I snatch a bottle of booze as Vera suggested and go about pouring them each a drink. I take my time doing it, waiting for them both to throw back the shots just so I can pour some more.

"He's just fucking sitting there," Aaron growls, checking his phone for the time. It just keeps tick-tick-ticking away. If the police cruiser arrives to find our cars empty, the six of us disappeared into the depths of a known gang hangout, then they'll come in looking for us. We can't risk that; it's an emergency contingency plan for a reason. The last thing Havoc needs is to be seen as a pack of snitches in the southside. "What gives?"

I glance back just in time to see a man with dark hair and an uneasy smile rise from his seat at the front of the room, like it's a dirty throne made of rusted nails and the bones of people he's broken in the pursuit of his own sadistic pleasure. Vera is right there with him, working that curvy Prescott body of hers, flashing her tits.

None of it is working.

Mason moves right past her, pushing his way through the crowd toward the bar and ordering a drink. A part of me wonders if we haven't misjudged him, if he isn't, in some small way, distraught over the death of James Barrasso. Maybe tonight he isn't looking for pussy?

But, of course, that's a ridiculous thought.

Mason's black gaze lifts up to mine and it's like an arrow has pierced straight through my chest. I take a step back, my ass bumping into the edge of the table that Aaron and Hael are seated around. I often call Victor's eyes black or—much to Mr. Darkwood's chagrin—ebon. But there's a depth to them, something poignant and organic, like the night sky or the darkened underbelly of a distant wood.

Mason ... his eyes are voids to another world, one where compassion goes to die.

Four minutes have ticked past by the time he starts making his way toward me.

“Bernadette,” Aaron warns from the booth behind me. “Start moving.”

But I don’t. The way Mason is looking at me, I can tell that he’s already made his decision for the night: I’m the girl that he wants.

“You,” he says, pausing in front of me. The way he looks at me, it feels like he’s peeling my skin back so he can lap at the blood inside. Wild, primal fear takes over me, the most feminine part of my brain screaming that I need to run. Now. Fast. Go, go, go, and never look back.

The thing is, we cannot move forward without killing Mason.

And we’re never going to get a better chance than we have now, tonight, here.

I go to set the bottle of liquor aside, but Mason snatches my wrist so hard that I hiss in pain between my teeth. He smells like iodine and bleach; I kid you not. And there’s just something so much worse about that antiseptic sterility. I’d have preferred sour breath or the stink of booze. *A neat monster*, I think as Mason takes the bottle of liquor and lifts it to his mouth. Swigging a healthy portion of it, he lets his eyes sweep the crowd. If he looks too closely at Hael and Aaron, there’s a chance—however slim—that he might recognize them.

It’s dark in here, smoky and hazy, strobe lights flashing as topless girls flicker across the surfaces of the stages. It’d take an eagle eye to spot anything unusual in the anonymous pit of the club. The thing is, I don’t put it past a man like Mason Miller to do just that. If Callum says this man is dangerous, then I believe him.

I scoot closer to Mason, allowing my breasts to brush against his chest. He curves his left arm around my shoulders, looking down at me with a sneering expression that has me fantasizing about the blade stuck in the sole of my boot. It slides into a small sheath embedded in the rubber, and even if it’s only about the length of my hand, I could kill a man with it if needed.

Just ... maybe not Mason Miller.

I don’t lose faith in my plan—it’ll still work, whether Mason chooses me or Vera—and allow him to lead me through the crowd, toward a dark hallway with a staircase. A chain is drawn across it, a small sign hanging from it that

warns against trespassing.

That's where we're *supposed* to be going.

Instead, Mason leads me right past the staircase and down a separate hall. In my pocket, I feel my phone buzz, but there's no way to answer it or even check to see who's calling me. Mason is too focused, his gaze flicking down to mine every few steps we take. At least I know that the call I made to Vic's phone outside the club is still connected; nothing else matters.

We make a right turn and Mason pauses at the sight of another man in the hall with us.

It's Tom Muller.

His eyes drop to mine before lifting back up to Mason's. He does a decent job of acting like he's never seen me before, but the pulse in his throat jumps at the sight of Maxwell's second-in-command, a dark fear and grudging respect etched into his gaze. Tom's brown eyes mimic his son's in color only; there is nothing of Tom's cruelty in David Benedict.

"Mason," Tom starts, nodding his head respectfully in the man's direction. "Do you like the girls this week?"

"Oh, I *love* the girls this week," Mason says with a harsh laugh, and then, before I can even think to react to his movements, he's drawing a pistol outfitted with a silencer and pulling the trigger. A neat, little hole appears in Tom's forehead just before he slumps to the ground at our feet, blood pooling in a circle of ruby red around him.

That's the first sign I have that something's wrong; I did not expect Tom Muller to die here tonight.

"Fuck," I murmur as Mason laughs and yanks me forward, shoving me into one of the downstairs rooms, the ones that used to be old bank vaults. The door slams into place as Mason flicks first one lock, then the next, and the next.

Three locks, all of them on a solid metal door that can't be blown up or shot down or picked.

Trapping us inside.

In here, nobody can hear Mason's girls scream. Nobody can hear them cry. Nobody can smell their blood.

This vault room, it may as well be a tomb.

I back away from Mason as he lifts the liquor bottle to his lips, finishing off the alcohol inside before tossing it aside and letting it shatter. He drags a

hand across his mouth as he looks me over, standing there in a corset and a miniskirt, my hair hidden beneath the red curls of an expensive wig.

“Fuck is right,” Mason tells me, grinning as he reaches down for his belt, sliding the leather from the loops of his pants with a hissing sound. “You and your boys think I’m stupid?” he clarifies, taking a step toward me and causing me to scoot back a few of my own. His gaze is as slick as oil, rife with perversion and violence. I can only imagine the things he’s done to girls in the dark.

And tonight, he recognized me. Just as Victor suggested he might. Just as Callum promised he would.

I smile.

“No, actually. The guy you almost killed—Callum Park—he was impressed. He told us we shouldn’t underestimate you.”

“So you show up at my club during a night of mourning?” Mason reaches out to take my arm, pausing briefly as he glances over his shoulder at a sound. It’s hardly anything. Most people would never notice it, not with the thumping, pounding bass from the main part of the club or the insistent, unrelenting creak of a bed on the floor above us.

Mason notices though, spinning around to find Callum waiting there with a knife in his hand. He toys with it, pressing a single finger against the end of the blade as he smiles.

“You were right, Mason. I am still human. I’m not sure why I denied it in the moment. Chalk it up to youthful inexperience. I’m grateful for your observation though, because I was reminded that I’m not the darkest, most twisted shadow in the night.”

“And you came back for another round?” Mason queries, his expression showing grim appreciation for Cal’s ability to predict his movements, but also a disturbing level of glee at the thought of being able to kill the blond boy in front of him. “Because that worked out so well for you last time?”

I slip my phone from my pocket, checking the time.

It’s now been eleven minutes since we pulled into the parking lot; we’re running out of time.

“Humans are like wolves,” Callum says, looking up from the knife to Mason Miller’s terrifying face. Mason has the same unsettling look in his eyes that the Thing possessed. The same look as Eric Kushner. The look of a predator. “We need a pack. A single wolf can’t bring down big prey. But a

pack? Well, a pack can do anything.”

Mason’s hand goes for the gun on his belt, but it’s too late. The sound of a hammer being pulled back surprises him. He glances up just in time to see Oscar rising to his feet after sliding out from underneath the bed.

“Cry ‘Havoc’,” Oscar drawls, silver eyes half-lidded with boredom. Mason reacts with lightning fast reflexes, but Oscar’s already pulled the trigger. The bullet from his revolver rips through the man’s throat, making him choke and stumble. Blood bubbles to his lips as Oscar pulls the trigger yet again, nailing Mason in the shoulder. Again, in the thigh. In the arm.

The monster slumps back, smearing crimson down the length of the vault door.

I squat down beside him, pushing some hair back from his forehead as his hands spasm and he tries—even in the throes of death—to go for the pistol he dropped on the ground after the first shot found its mark.

“I want you to know that we didn’t kill you here today.” I stroke the man’s face as he stares at me with wide eyes, ones that ask a simple question: *what happens to me after this?* I haven’t the faintest idea, but I do hope that it’s something awful, whether a pit in the depths of hell or rebirth as a banana slug who gets promptly salted, I don’t give a fuck. But at least Mason Miller, as he is now, won’t be around to hurt anymore girls. “You were killed by a bunch of hookers. They gave us intel. They told us where to find you. They let us in. Whores. Prostitutes. Call girls. That’s why you’re dead right now.”

I lift the discarded pistol up to Mason’s head and smile.

“Fuck you.”

And then I pull the trigger and blood spatters my face, staining it crimson. I pull my phone from my pocket, the connection to Victor’s still going strong.

“I take it it’s done?” he asks as I rise to my feet, bringing the gun with me. The GMP will dispose of Mason’s body discreetly, so there’s no concern there, but I’m not letting them keep a murder weapon with my fingerprints on it.

“It’s done,” I say as Cal unlocks the door and swings it open to reveal Aaron, Hael, and Vic waiting for us.

“I do love it when things go according to plan,” Oscar remarks, frowning at a tiny fleck of red on the end of his shirtsleeve.

Vera appears at the end of the hall, holding the duffel bag I asked her to bring. She hands it over wordlessly, peering into the room behind me at

Mason's body just before Cal drags the door shut again. Likely, the man will be left alone in there until Monday, the way all the call girls say he likes. The GMP won't know he's dead for a while, long enough for us to leave, get some sleep, and then head to Oak Valley first thing Monday morning.

Brilliant.

"Two minutes left," Victor warns, nodding his chin in the direction of the exit. We slip out quietly, taking Vera with us. She's got her own ride, but I grab her hand before she takes off, giving it a quick squeeze.

"Might need my nails touched up sometime soon," I offer in a tentative reach for friendship. I've never been all that good at it, making friends with girls. Shit, last time I tried it, I ended up with Kali as a bestie and we all know how that turned out. But one bad apple isn't going to spoil my whole barrel. A million bad experiences can't erase the sweet memories of companionship that I had with Penelope.

"Girl, anytime." Vera's gaze slips past me to the waiting horde of boys, and the edge of her painted mouth quirks up at the corner. "You're going to need someone with a vagina to talk to, after drowning under all that dick." She gives me a lipstick-studded kiss on my bloody cheek before scurrying off into the dark, so our pursuers won't see her if they happen to pull up.

"Time to get the fuck out of here," I murmur, a slight smile pulling at my own mouth.

We climb into our respective vehicles and take off, heading back down the busy West Burnside Street toward the highway. This time, Aaron takes the wheel so I can open Vera's duffel bag.

I shove the wig in first, snatching a package of lavender-scented wet wipes to swipe the smattering of blood from my face. Then I very quickly grab the oversized skeleton hoodie I was wearing when we initially left the house from the back seat. Once I've got that on and zipped up, I hit the button that brings down the top of the convertible.

As it folds back with a mechanical purr, I can feel the crisp night air crawling down my throat. When I laugh, I swear, I can taste stars.

About a half mile from Kay's, we pass a familiar-looking maroon Subaru. For the briefest of seconds there, it feels like time slows to a crawl, and I glance over, meeting Sara Young's eyes for the briefest of moments before her vehicle continues toward the club and ours barrels toward Springfield and the seedy little neighborhood that bred a pack of wild dogs.

Cry Havoc, baby.

Wesley's is packed, as it always is on a Friday night. Vintage cars fill the slanted parking spaces where employees pause on rollerblades, hooking metal trays to windows that are rolled halfway down. Here and there, a vehicle creaks and rocks as its teenage occupants fuck in a dance as old as time.

Me, I sit on the hood of the pink and white Caddy my boyfriend built for me, licking a strawberry ice cream cone in a way that makes all five of the dangerous men I call my boys gaze at me like wolves might watch a sheep.

The thing is, I warned them before: *you thought you caged a kitty cat? You got a fucking cougar. Watch my claws when you take me to bed.*

So, if we're running with the dogs of war or the wolf pack reference, then I guess I'm a snarling canine with slaver dripping from its jaws. Also, slaver means saliva in case you didn't know. Mr. Darkwood once tried to correct that word in one of my poems, so I wrote the definition in chalk on the back of his car and got detention for a week.

Poor Mr. Darkwood.

According to the Prescott goss circulating on social media, he's still alive but in critical condition. I truly hope the man pulls through, much as we disagree on particular word choices. It's not his fault if he's a boomer who doesn't know how to use Google.

"*Stupid Cupid*" by Connie Francis is playing over the speakers, and I swear, I spot the elderly owners dancing inside the eat-in portion of the restaurant. There's an old-fashioned jukebox in there, black and white checkered floors, and booths outfitted with cracked red leather. Somehow, the image reminds me of that 1942 painting, *Nighthawks* by Edward Hopper.

"The Charter Crew really did a number on this place, huh?" Hael asks, whistling as he leans back and looks up at the ruined sign near the entrance to the parking lot. It's about forty feet high and on most nights, blazing with light to invite customers into the drive-in. It might be dark now, but with the nearly full moon blazing above us, I can see the cracked and ruined surface covered in graffiti.

There's a silhouetted clown face emblazoned there now, but that's okay.

We brought a few cans of spray paint with us.

At the opposite end of the lot, Sara and Constantine sit in their car, watching us. Sara doesn't like what we did tonight because she knows it has *something* to do with the GMP. The thing is, no matter how hard she tries to figure it out, she never will. In her wildest dreams, I doubt she'd ever consider that I shot Mason Miller in the head.

Also, that missed call I felt coming in on my phone at the club? It was from Sara. I called her on the way back, but my explanation about our brief visit to Portland didn't seem to satisfy her.

"Could you just not with the ice cream?" Aaron asks, looking at me like he's very much interested in recreating our visit to the drive-in when he fucked me in the backseat of the Bronco and smacked my ass. "Lick it like that, I mean?"

I open my mouth nice and wide, sliding the length of my tongue up to the pert pink tip of the ice cream. Aaron groans, slouched on the top of one of the tables, his foot outstretched, his medical boot still conspicuously absent. He says he's okay to walk, but I caught him wincing when he climbed out of the Eldorado.

"I will eat my ice cream however the fuck I want," I declare, leaning back in the skeleton hoodie, booted ankles crossed. My miniskirt rides up a little further than it should, the black buckles of my garters glinting in the lights from the diner window.

"Let her do it," Hael purrs, hopping up beside me on the hood of the Eldorado. "Personally, I'm enjoying the show."

"It's not that I'm not enjoying it," Aaron says, cupping his denim-clad crotch with a bit of a groan. "It's that I'm enjoying it too much."

"Why don't you two just fuck in the backseat the way you did last time you were here?" Vic suggests, and I smirk at the jealous note laced through his voice. He's watching me from the bench seat of the table where Aaron reclines, dark eyes drifting toward the street and then over to the woods on the other side of the lot.

"No fighting," Cal warns, shaking one of the cans of spray paint as he glances over his shoulder. "We've had a good night tonight. Don't ruin it by being jealous, Vic." He stands up and strolls off in the direction of the portable toilets that line one side of the parking lot. This place gets busy enough that the single toilet inside isn't enough, particularly when Prescott

girls are always in there fixing their makeup. Or screwing. Plenty of kids go in there with that specific purpose in mind.

Anyway, Cal is able to slip into the shadows and out of Sara and Constantine's view. I surreptitiously flick my eyes toward the metal pole of the now defunct sign as he begins to climb, shimmying his way up to the top. Once there, he makes quick work of the clown face, replacing it with one simple word.

That one word you definitely don't utter at Prescott High.

Not unless you want them to own you. Destroy you. Consume you.

Not unless you want their love to obliterate you, to burn away your inhibitions like a moth drifting too close to the precarious twist of an orange-red flame.

Havoc.

"You did well tonight, Bernadette." Oscar toys with the tray of food beside him, the tray he ordered much to my surprise. After a moment, he sits up straight and unwraps a burger, staring down at it with an intensity that would scare the shit out of me if, you know, I was the hamburger in question.

"Don't act so shocked," I say, sitting up fully and swinging my feet, heels bumping against the side of the Caddy. It fits in well here, with all these poor kids and classic cars and nostalgia. "I'm more than just a slippery cunt, you know."

"As if I've ever treated you that way," Oscar retorts and then, after another agonizing moment of staring at his food, he takes a bite of the burger. *Good boy*. He really is human after all.

"You're right, you're right," I say, slicking my tongue around the ice cream cone in a way that really isn't fair to poor Aaron. "You never treated me like a piece of ass—just a thorn in your side." I wink at him to soften the blow, but it's hard to stay mad at the guy when he's got just the slightest bit of ketchup at the edge of his sharp mouth. He swipes it away with a quick flick of his tongue and I shiver. "But we're all better now, aren't we?"

"How could I mistreat you now?" he queries back, taking another bite of his food and closing his eyes for a moment while he chews. He opens them again, directing his attention back to me. "After what happened with the ..." Oscar trails off for a moment, setting the remainder of his food down on the wrapper and meticulously cleaning his fingers with a napkin. It always throws me off when he's wearing anything but a suit. Right now, of course,

he's got on the same matching black hoodie and black jeans as the others, but he's the only one of the Havoc boys with a bit of white shirtsleeve peeking out against his tattooed wrists. "Miscarriage."

"Ah, that," I say, finally giving up on my sexual exploration of the ice cream and biting off the edge of the cone with a crunch. My eyes drift back to Cal as he slides down the pole of the sign just in time for Sara Young to glance his way. I swear, I can visibly see her sighing inside the Subaru. After a moment of what looks like arguing with Constantine, she starts the car and the two of them leave.

Guess they've had enough of watching us fuck and eat and chat like normal teenagers. Nothing to see here, folks. We totally didn't just murder a nasty fucked-up pervert named Mason Miller. I have to say, I most definitely will not be seeing his ghost or James Barrasso's ghost now or ever. I've got absolutely zero guilt about their metaphorical blood tainting my fingers.

"That," Victor repeats with a long sigh, finally turning back to me. That stark possession in his gaze makes me shiver all over, and I know that when we get back to the hideous refuge of our safe house, I'll probably spread my legs for him and submit beneath the wild, primal thrusting of his hips. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"It wasn't even really a miscarriage," I start, but that's sort of a cop-out thing to say. "It was a chemical pregnancy—meaning the egg is fertilized but it never fully implants in the uterus. If they hadn't drawn my blood at the hospital, I might not even have realized ..."

"Don't downplay that shit to me," Victor says, and his words are rough and very close to the cadence of his usual orders. But there's pain there, too, and I have to remember that I wasn't the only person that experienced that. It hurt him, and if it hurt him then it hurt me, too. I give him an apologetic look and he sighs. "But I'm glad you're okay."

"I'm not okay," Aaron says as Callum rejoins us, chucking the spray paint into the nearest garbage can before he crawls up onto the hood of the Camaro and crouches there. Hael watches him for a moment, but then turns his attention back to me. I remember that day outside Billie Charter's ratchet ass trailer when Vic warned me against touching Hael's car. Guess his sweet little bromance with Callum also allows for an exception to that rule.

"I'm not either," Hael adds, shrugging his big shoulders. "But I feel marginally better knowing that Mason is a smear of crimson on the wall of

KKKay's."

I shove the rest of the ice cream cone into my mouth, chewing it thoughtfully.

"This will garner us a lot of respect among the lesser members of the GMP," Callum muses as Victor hands him the rest of his chili cheese fries. Cal takes them, parking the basket between his booted feet as he maintains his crouch on the hood.

Across the lot, I see Vera climbing out of the passenger side of another pretty little vintage car. She's wearing a completely different outfit than she had on at the club, and she pauses briefly on her way inside to wave at me. I wave right back.

"Frame-off restoration, mad respect," Hael murmurs as he checks out her date's car. He knows every student at Prescott with a classic car, and far too many details about their restoration projects. Sometimes, he forgets the person's name but remembers the make and model of their vehicle. We all ignore him as he rubs his crotch the way Aaron did when it came to my sexual sucking of the ice cream cone.

"Mason's death will make it even harder to convince any of his lower-level employees to come after us. Factor in James' death, and the loss of Russ Bauer and Will Market, and there won't be an asshole in that gang who volunteers for the project." Victor is still watching me like the loss of that pregnancy is still weighing heavily on his mind. He's talking business, but he's thinking personal shit.

"Hey," I tell him, sliding off the hood and moving over to stand in front of him. He isn't about to just let me *stand* there, so he grabs me and yanks me into his lap instead, reminding me of that day he took me to the abandoned jailhouse and told me how much we both needed each other.

"I need a way to let my demons out, and you need a way to confront them."

Fuck, that was sexy. How did I not just die on the spot? My fingers trace up the rounded curves of his tattooed arms, his sweater discarded so I can better examine the pull of his threadbare cotton shirt across his strong chest. No wonder Ophelia is afraid of her son. She should be. Their beef is far from just professional—it's extremely personal. When I let myself think about baby Vic suffering under the cruel hands of rich perverts, I start to crack around the edges with the desperate need for violence.

"Hey, what?" he asks, cocking a dark brow. My hands lift up to explore the

masculine planes of his face. I use both of my thumbs to trace the beautiful curve of his lower lip. His tongue follows the motion, and my body gives an involuntary shudder.

“Think of the chemical pregnancy as a good thing. Like, it means I *can* get pregnant.” My mouth twitches a little since pregnancy and kids and shit are like, ten years too soon for me right now. “With my irregular periods, it was sort of a toss-up.”

Vic places his big hands over mine, pressing my fingers into each side of his face. Aaron watches us, but his body is relaxed, his expression soft. We’re settling into this together, into being a family, the way we should’ve been all along. Eight-year-old me should’ve lifted her chin up and stormed across that playground in her yellow rainboots and declared herself the keeper of these unruly boys. But since I can’t exactly go back in time, I’m making up for that now.

“When can we start on that by the way?” Vic asks, and I give a dry laugh. “Trying again, I mean.”

“You’re such a dick,” Aaron murmurs, glancing away toward the diner and the happy chatter from inside. We bounce back quick in Prescott. The shooting is a scar that streaks across the neighborhood, but we’re used to scars here. We live in the shape of scars, ragged lines that never quite heal. “She isn’t ready for a baby.”

“But when she is,” Hael begins, and I glance back in time just to see him flash a signature grin. “Who gets to go first? I think since Victor gets the legal marriage, and Aaron got the V-card—”

I interrupt here just to insert some of my ‘crazy political views’.

“Virginity is an abstract patriarchal social construct that has zero validity and exists for the sole purpose of commoditizing young women but go on, I’ll wait.”

Hael snorts and shakes his head, sitting up and leaning forward to put his elbows on his knees.

“I say it’s between me, Cal, and Oscar.”

“I say,” Cal begins, sitting down on the hood and putting his basket of fries in his lap. “We just fuck bareback and forgo a DNA test. Seems the fairest way to go, in my opinion.”

“You would think up an egalitarian approach to orgies and conception,” Oscar inserts, glancing back at me in just such a way that I wonder if he isn’t

interested in a bio kid of his own. Biology means basically nothing to me. If I let myself dwell on it too much, I'd have to consider that Pamela and her broken, twisted DNA were an infection on my soul. That just can't be true. We're human, and if being human means anything at all, then it means overcoming the basics of biology by using our brains and our hearts and our spirits. "But I would like a child specifically made of my seed."

My turn to snort a laugh as I adjust myself from Vic's lap to the tabletop between him and Aaron, so I can better see all five boys at the same time.

"Just so you all understand that I'm the only one who gets to decide how this goes." I muse on it for a moment, wondering if I'm really going to have to have like, five kids or something in the future, just to please five alpha dicks. "If you're all really, really nice to me, I'll consider your wishes on my thirtieth birthday. Then you can, like, draw straws or some shit."

"I'm happy to go last or not at all," Aaron volunteers, looking back at me with his pretty eyes glittering mischievously. He's being serious, and he's being nice, but he's also throwing that niceness in the faces of the other boys to be a dick. Which I like. A lot, actually. "Whatever makes Bernie happiest."

"Okay, fuck you, Fadler," Vic says, chucking a stray fry in his direction, but he doesn't sound totally pissed off about it. His obsidian gaze sweeps Aaron before panning across the other three boys. "Look, I'm not an easy person to get along with."

"Understatement," Oscar murmurs, but Vic just narrows his eyes and chooses not to comment.

"Anyway, I acknowledge Hael's feelings—even if I consider him to be a whiny little bitch."

"Aww," Hael says, putting a hand to his heart as Cal chuckles. "I appreciate that, Vicki."

"Call me Vicki again and see what happens," Victor challenges, but he's clearly being playful, and my heart swells like sixty-nine sizes larger. "We're in this together, alright? I get it. I don't share Bernadette; Bernadette shares herself. You happy now?"

"You look like you're in the middle of an enema," Hael muses, but he's already smiling. "But you know what? I'll take it. We've got to be solid, going into that fucked-up hellhole they call a prep school. There's no room for dissent."

Cal cups his hands around his mouth and howls, taking up the mantle of

my little cry Havoc game.

The other boys follow suit and I mimic them, adding my voice to the chorus of sound as it takes over the night. In less than a minute, we've got more than three-quarters of the parking lot joining us.

It's a fitting way to end our time at Prescott High, now isn't it?

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CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

There's something sinister about the grounds of Oak Valley Preparatory Academy. The last time we were here, to talk to David and Trinity, I felt it, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Now that we're here to stay, dragging bags from our cars and tossing them into a shared pile behind Hael's Camaro, I know what it is: *excess*.

"Fuck, I hate this place," I murmur, putting my hands on my hips as I stare up at the soaring sides of the dormitory. The ornate oak leaf designs around the windows and doors probably speak to some specialized form of architecture, but ... we don't really teach that sort of shit at Prescott High, you know what I mean?

I do, however, know that holding your keys between your knuckles isn't a very good self-defense technique. Sure, if your attacker isn't very experienced, those keys will hurt when you throw a punch. But if they know shit about shit, then they'll just grab your hand in theirs and grind the sharp ends of the keys into *you*.

That's what we teach at Prescott High. That, and how to contour, or do a Kegel, or suck a dick. Beat a bitch's ass. Hotwire a car. That sort of thing.

I'm sure the teachers here are going to *love* the six of us.

I light up a cigarette as the boys finish unloading our things. We don't have a lot—of physical crap anyway. It's the emotional stuff we have in spades, that heavy, deep, aching sense of belonging, like a thorn in your side that you

don't want to pull out because you hate to love the way it hurts.

"At least we get to be here with the girls," Aaron suggests, lighting up a cigarette of his own. The flicker of the flame bathes his just-this-side-of-too-pretty face in nicotine, tobacco, and bullshit. I like that, the way he can go from looking like the boy next door to the man that kicked the boy next door's ass. "Three and a half months. That's it. Then we're done with all of ... this." He turns his green-gold gaze to the building, pausing at the sound of approaching footsteps on the gravel.

Before I even turn around, my eyes catch on Victor's and I know exactly who's going to be standing there when I finally deign to look.

Trinity Jade waits off to one side, dressed in her heather gray jacket and charcoal pleated skirt, sky blue tie catching in the breeze. It tangles her gold hair around her face as she studies us with dust-colored eyes.

"It's always a pain when the wind shifts, isn't it?" she asks, reaching up to tuck some stray blond strands behind her ear. "Sometimes, it blows Prescott trash into the wrong neighborhood."

"Oh, and it looks like that's too motherfucking bad," I purr back at her, loving the way her eyes take in my curvy form, my too-small red tee that shows off my belly button, and the soft waves of my blood-dipped hair. Maybe she can see that I've got that freshly fucked look in my cheeks, too? Having five boyfriends is a real treat when you're as parched as I am. "Because if you're not really, *really* nice to me ..." I move up to stand in front of her, glad that I chose to wear wedges today. Tack those few extra inches onto my already much-taller-than-other-girls frame, and I tower over Trinity Jade. "I'm going to tell daddy Samuel *all* about your cheap-ass gangster blood."

I grind my teeth briefly and flick my tongue against the corner of my mouth, just to taste my ratchet ass lipstick, just to make sure it's still there. If you're smart, it isn't difficult to steal nice lip stains. If you're skilled, you can mix and paint and sculpt the cheap shit until it *looks* like the good stuff.

That's what I've done today.

I call this shade *Missed Opportunities*. It's red and scary and it reminds me of the blood that wouldn't stop running down my legs.

Trinity looks right past me, toward Vic instead.

"I've spoken to my grandfather; he agreed to play along with this game of annulment for my sake, but he doesn't understand. He's a very forthright and

honest sort of man. This won't last long."

Victor ignores her, looking at his Harley with a pained sort of expression. A valet is supposed to come by shortly to move our vehicles to the *Student Parking Area*. I don't much like the idea of being separated from our only modes of transportation, but it's part of the game, and we're all very good at playing games.

"You can deal with my wife," Vic says, gesturing in my direction with his chin as Aaron locks up the Bronco and gives it a gentle pat. Hael looks half-ready to cry over the Camaro, but it's the Eldorado that's really got him twisted up. "*I restored that car for you, babe. Not for some stuffy ass valet to fuck around with.*"

Sacrifices must be made, I suppose.

"Pardon?" Trinity queries, giving these long, slow blinks that really push me over the edge into believing she's a true psychopath. Remember when I slammed her head into the bar at her own murder-mystery party? Or shoved the heel of my hand into her nose at the art gallery? I barely got a reaction out of the bitch. She's fucking insane.

"Do you speak English?" Hael asks, cocking his head to one side. "Or do you need it in French: *Tu peux parler avec notre femme. Au passage, va te faire foutre.*" Hael smiles tightly and moves away as Trinity murmurs something in response, also in French. That gives him pause, and I see his hands curling into tight fists at his sides.

I decide not to ask for a translation on that one.

I cock a brow.

"Grandpa know you're not really Samuel's kid?" I ask, and Trinity gives me a sharp look that very clearly says *not too loud, not here*. Luckily for her, it doesn't suit us to give out this secret either. We intend to hold it nice and tight—until the time is right, of course. Obviously, at some point, we're going to tell the whole motherfucking world.

Just not quite yet.

"Alright," I continue, because we're not really here to have any sort of normal conversation. Just extortion and threats today. "Well, the next thing you're going to do is get Gramps to tell Ophelia that you and Victor are legally married. We know how to get ahold of a very convincing marriage certificate to help the ruse along."

She just keeps *staring* at me in that creepy way of hers, the wind rustling

her skirt around her pale thighs.

“And how am I supposed to convince him to do that?” she snaps, but I just laugh because that isn’t my fucking problem.

“Look, this benefits you just as much as it does us. Ophelia will rat your ass out if you don’t comply, am I right? You must’ve figured out by now that she’s a vindictive psycho.” I start to turn away, but Trinity makes a hissing sound that stops me in my tracks. Her eyes dart to Oscar as he pauses beside me in a black-on-black-on-black suit, shirt, and tie, like he’s attending another funeral. Might as well be. This is basically the end of everything I’ve ever known. I’m trying to be positive here, but ... just *look* at this place. Look at it. Pompous wealth built on the subjugation and abuse of others. That, and half the rich daddies that send their kids here participate in the GMP’s pedo ring.

I almost gag but manage to keep my reaction schooled to one of mild annoyance.

“I’m your student guide for the day,” Trinity bites out, like a rubber band snapping against my skin. “Follow me and I’ll show you to your ... *room*.” She sneers at us, but I just grin. Leave it to Victor and Oscar to arrange for us to be housed in one of the vacant staff apartments.

Apparently, having proof that two of the schoolboard member’s wives are pedophiles gets us a lot of extra goodies. Also, according to Vic, our contacts seemed relieved at being able to shove us into a forgotten corner away from the other students. So I guess this works for everyone involved.

I wonder what Sara Young thinks about all this? Does she *really* believe that the six of us just happened to snag half of the twelve scholarship positions given to Prescott High? Nah. She must know my grades—and Hael’s and probably Cal’s—aren’t nearly good enough. But oh well. Not my problem either.

“How long are we to keep up this charade?” Trinity asks as I watch my boys pile duffel bags onto their shoulders and boxes in their arms. I pick up and hold nothing. I’m not dating five muscular men to move shit around. I flip my hair and follow after Trinity, noticing that the few students out at this early hour keep their eyes averted and their chins down.

Good for them. Smart choice. I light a cigarette even as Trinity seethes and her skin ripples with hatred.

“Smoking is a filthy habit,” she tells me, as if she thinks I give a flying

fuck.

“Some people might say fucking your half-brother is a filthy habit, but I try not to judge.” I shrug my shoulders as her perfect jaw tenses with rage and she leads us down a narrow path between the student dorms and the staff apartments, taking a door on the left instead of the one on the right. Close enough though. The old buildings are practically within arm’s length of one another.

It takes a keycard to get into the apartment which I appreciate. Also, it looks like said keycard system is newly installed—probably thanks to us and our breach of the student dorms after Donald Asher. My turn to shiver with hatred as I smoke my cigarette like I own this damn place, following Trinity through a posh lounge area that’s blissfully empty at this time. The smoking thing won’t work in front of the regular staff; they won’t know about Havoc’s little arrangement with the schoolboard.

I’m going to have to, like, actually pretend to study and shit while I’m here.

“As for your previous question, we’ll keep up this ‘charade’ until Victor and I have been married a full year and he gets his inheritance. You’ve only got nine months left to wait, lucky you.”

“And how am I supposed to find assurance in that? Once you’ve gotten what you want, what stops you from spilling my secret?” Trinity glances over her shoulder as we pause in front of an elevator. Wow. A building with an elevator. Most definitely not something you find in south Prescott or, if you do, you wouldn’t get on it if you were smart. “What stops Ophelia? If she finds out that I’m ... *helping* you ...” Trinity pauses for a moment to let out a sharp, angry exhale. “Then *she* could very well talk to my father. What then?”

“God, you’re annoying,” I murmur as the elevator doors ding open and we squeeze inside together, the boys forming a wall of muscle and ink across the front. Trinity instructs Cal to hit the button for the eleventh floor and up we go. “Look, we have plans for Ophelia. Does that help? I wouldn’t worry about her.”

“It’s *you* that I’m worried about,” Trinity tells me as I glance over and find her creepy pale brown eyes studying me. They’re the color of a brown recluse or a puddle of mud diluted with water. At least, that’s how I perceive them. Maybe when James Barrasso gazed into his sister/fuckbuddy’s brown

eyes, he saw something entirely different. Too bad I had to gouge *his* eyes out with my thumbs. Does Trinity know exactly how he met his end? I'm guessing not.

"Once we have our money, we won't give a fuck what happens to you, princess," I drawl, stabbing my cigarette out on the front of her book bag and watching as her teeth grind together in a rare show of frustration. Trinity schools her expression again with a monumental amount of effort.

"Why don't you keep asking prying questions?" Oscar suggests, and then I notice in the mirrored walls as he puts his revolver up against the side of Trinity's skull. She returns his stare in the very same mirror, body going completely still. There are cameras all over this fucking school but, incidentally, there are none inside the elevator.

A dark zone.

Good to know.

Trinity says nothing and Oscar puts his weapon away just in time for the doors to slide open with a pleasant ding. We file out into the posh hallway and my skin crawls with the wrongness of it. The marble floors, the textured wallpaper, the light fixtures with the stained glass. This isn't where I belong, where any of us belongs.

But, if anything, Prescott kids are masters of adaptation.

That's what we have to do now, adapt.

I keep my inuring social commentary to myself for the time being as Trinity shoulders her way between the boys and leads us down the hall to the first door on the right. She unlocks the door with a keycard that Oscar immediately whips out of her fingers.

"How do we know you don't have other copies of this?" he inquires, hitting the corner of the plastic card against the door of the apartment as Trinity pushes it open, her brown eyes blazing. Looks like there really is a limit to what she'll take.

"You don't know, and there's no way for me to make that assurance—in the same manner that you can't convince me you won't turn like rabid dogs after collecting on the inheritance." Trinity walks into the middle of the apartment and pauses, turning to face us with a frown etched onto what she probably hopes people think are nude lips. But I know better. I know *all* about Oak Valley Prep girls and their obsession with caking makeup on their faces in just such a way that it looks like they're wearing nothing at all.

Oscar flicks the card onto a stone countertop as the boys dump boxes and bags in the middle of the room and Hael, Cal, and Aaron move into adjoining bedrooms for a quick sweep. This is a ‘family apartment’ meant for on-site staff who have children or spouses or other relatives living with them. It’s about size of Aaron’s house except it’s all on one level and furnished with beige and gray and linen and leather. A wall of windows opposite the door looks out onto the Oak Valley campus. To my left, there’s a kitchenette with appliances that look too fancy to be used. Beside that, a short hallway that Aaron’s currently disappeared down, and two doors—one of which looks to be a bathroom, the other a bedroom.

“You have an hour to get accommodated and changed into your uniforms.” Trinity points a slender finger at a pile of garment bags on the smaller of the two sofas. “If anything needs to be adjusted, the on-campus tailor—”

I let out a snort and her wicked eyes trail over to mine as Vic leans a muscular shoulder against the panes of floor-to-ceiling glass.

“On-campus tailor,” I repeat with a harsh, mocking laugh as Oscar moves over to the pile of uniforms and checks the sizes on each bag before separating them into piles. “Of course. Do go on.”

“You’re crass and uncultured,” Trinity spits back at me, flipping her golden hair over her shoulder and closing her eyes like she desperately needs a moment to gather herself together. “You will *never* fit in here.”

I touch a hand to my chest and make a sweet moue of feigned disappointment.

“Aw, you think so?” I query back, resisting the violent and unyielding urge to grab that fine, gold hair of hers in a fist and throw her against the wall until it’s streaked with blood. “That’s so sweet of you.”

With another huff of frustration, Trinity spins and heads for the door of the apartment.

“I’ll meet you in the downstairs lobby in an hour,” she sneers, wrenching the door open and disappearing into the hallway. It slams shut on its own behind her and Oscar moves over to examine the locks.

“Keycards are too easily manipulated,” he says, testing the deadbolt. “We’ll get our own locks, ones that can’t be hacked. A combination that can’t be picked.”

Hael and Callum reappear from the direction of another hallway, directly opposite the one where Aaron’s reemerging from.

“All good on our side,” Hael confirms and Aaron nods in agreement.

“Same.”

And then Oscar turns around and we’re all just sort of standing there in a loose circle looking at each other.

“Oh come on,” Vic says, pushing up from his position against the window with a grin. He throws an arm around my shoulders in a way that should be entirely companionable but comes across as possessive and needy instead. Fantasies of being fucked against the glass of these windows, butt naked and looking over the campus as the boys take turns on me, fills my head and makes it suddenly hard to breathe.

Oh, even better if I were dressed in my uniform, my pleated skirt bunched up around my hips ...

“Don’t act like somebody fucking died,” Vic continues, pressing a scalding kiss to the side of my head that does nothing to dry the sudden rush of hot heat between my thighs. “We’re living in a luxury apartment on the eleventh floor. We’ve got round the clock security; the girls are safe. Mason is dead.” Victor pauses at the sound of his phone buzzing, glancing down at the screen with a wry smile on his lips.

“Ophelia?” Oscar guesses, crossing his arms over his chest. Seeing him in the Oak Valley Prep uniform won’t be much different than seeing him in his usual suits but for the color. Seeing any of the others in a jacket and tie ... that’s going to rock my world. At first, I’ll probably hate it, then I’ll probably get off on it, and then ... who knows?

“Ophelia,” Vic confirms, answering the call and putting it on speaker at the same moment. “Mother.”

“You wicked little monster,” she hisses and while I would normally say something like that and mean it as a compliment, I’m fairly certain Ophelia Mars intends for it to be an insult. “Mason Miller? Inside the club of all places? Now, how on earth did you manage to pull that one off?”

Vic sits down on the larger sofa, putting his phone on the coffee table in a strange déjà vu moment where I think of him sitting in Aaron’s living room, talking to Mitch Charter in this same manner. Full circle, baby. But trying to compare Ophelia and Mitch is laughable—they’re not even in the same league.

“Mason Miller?” Vic queries, and then he laughs as his mother huffs an exasperated sigh. Meanwhile, Hael wanders over to the fridge—carefully

disguised as one of the cabinets—and opens it, searching for something to eat. It's empty, obviously, and he shuts it with a pained sigh. "Oh, that's right. That pervert we killed on Friday. Tell me: at anytime while you were riding Maxwell Barrasso's dick, did you not consider that we were going to retaliate for what happened at our school?"

"Your message was received loud and clear." Ophelia pauses here, and I swear, I can hear the sound of her pacing in high heels. "Tom is dead."

"Not by our hand," Victor says, leaning back in his seat as I drop down next to him, Cal perches on the arm, and Hael and Aaron accept piles of garment bags that Oscar hands over to them. "That was Mason's doing. Are you terribly upset? Oh, wait, you have no heart. That's a virtual impossibility."

"Son, do not test me right now." Ophelia stops her pacing. I can almost see her in my mind's eye, torn between being pleased at the development of the annulment and furious over Mason's and Tom's deaths—both of which she's going to blame us for, regardless of what actually happened. "How is your new school? You know, I have a lot of regrets in my life and not sending you through the Oak Private School System is one of them. You belong there, Victor. Your blood is as blue as any other student there."

"Mm, it's almost like you think I give a shit about any of that. I'm not a golden retriever, Ophelia, a dog that you bred for its curly coat and pretty eyes. I'm your son, a son that you paraded in front of perverted men when Ruby stopped giving you money."

"Don't be so dramatic, Victor," Ophelia says, and that's when I see it. For the very first time. A real and true and genuine crack in Vic's self-control. He grabs the phone from the table, his knuckles turning white as he squeezes it too hard, hard enough to crack the screen.

"Dramatic?" he whispers back, his voice so low and dark that I actually shiver in response. Oscar pauses in his sorting of the uniforms to look back at Vic, exchanging a brief look with Callum as he does. "You're calling me dramatic because I didn't like grown men touching me when I was a child? You think this is funny?"

"Don't think I don't know that you've been living outside of your father's place," Ophelia continues, throwing the rules of the trust into her son's face. "And what's this I hear about an apartment on campus? Do you want to lose this thing so easily, Vic?"

“You filthy bitch,” Victor snarls back, rising to his feet, still clutching the phone. His left hand clenches and unclenches at his side as he grinds his teeth together. “Do you really think you can peg me on a technicality? You know as well as I do that Ruby’s trust allows me to live on the campus of an educational facility. I’m going to win this game, and I’m going to win it with my hands wrapped around your motherfucking throat.”

Vic throws his phone as hard as he can against the far wall, shattering it to pieces as he storms away from the couch and I scramble to take off after him.

“Vic,” I start as he yanks open the front door like he’s going to leave the apartment.

I move up behind him, unsure if I should actually touch him or not. He’s bristling now. He’s on fire. He’s ... coming apart in a way that’s probably healthy but also a little bit scary. *Wield it like a weapon.* It’s like, all these years of holding back that temper, of saving it, of collecting those flames into an inferno, and Victor is getting ready to unleash it.

“I need to take a walk,” he says, his dark eyes sliding briefly over to me. His expression softens enough that I know today isn’t the day he breaks. Not today. Not yet. But soon.

“Do you need me?” I ask, and Victor gives a visible shudder at the words, swiping a hand down his face. I want nothing more right now than to help him through this, the way he’s helped me time and again deal with my own over-the-top temper.

His obsidian gaze starts at my feet and rakes up my body, making me shiver and crackle like my skin is made of coals and his eyes are the flame that finally ignites the blaze. I didn’t know about the exceptions in his trust, the ones that allowed him to withdraw money for education, the ones that allow him to live here without breaking the stipulation that he lives with his father until graduation.

That means ... all along ... Victor could’ve left Prescott High and his drunk father and all of that bullshit behind. He has the grades to get in here, the connections. Even Ophelia claimed she always wanted him to go to school here (not totally sure I believe that, but I guess it might’ve helped her maintain the failing image of an aristocrat).

Anyway, I don’t have to ask why Vic didn’t leave.

It’s pretty goddamn obvious: *me*.

His love is far from selfish. Or, if it is, then it’s much more than that, too.

Victor very carefully closes the front door and turns around to look at me, dark gaze blazing in such a way that I can't seem to help the soft gasp that falls from my lips. I'm not such a badass now, am I? Faced with the unrelenting magnanimity of his stare.

"Get your uniform on," he tells me, and I can't help the shudder that takes over me, making my skin ripple and ache from my head down to the very tips of my toes. Victor stalks off down the short hallway toward the bathroom before disappearing inside, and I let out a long breath that I didn't even mean to hold.

"Jesus," Aaron murmurs as I glance his way, studying the sharp masculinity of a face that was once boyish and sweet and now can only just barely teeter on that edge in the right lighting.

Several things occur to me then.

Aaron's house is on the very edge of Prescott, straddling the official boundary of the Fuller neighborhood. He could've gone to Fuller High if he'd wanted, I bet. And Cal, he was talented enough that he could've run away all together, left this nightmare of a city behind. Hael could've quit school to work on cars. Oscar is too smart to be stuck in Prescott; he likely could've snagged the one and only scholarship spot that Oak Valley opens each year (each year there isn't a school shooting, that is).

The only person who was truly and utterly stuck in Prescott High was ... me.

"Excuse me," I choke out, snatching the pile of bags and a single shoe box that Oscar has carefully gathered into a neat pile on the coffee table, and taking off for the bedroom nearest the bathroom. I slam the door behind me, putting my back to it and closing my eyes for a moment.

My heart races, and my spirit swells, and there's nowhere for that energy to go but into my hands and fingers as I throw all the items in my arms onto the king-size bed against the far wall. It's dressed plainly in white sheets, white pillows, and a matching down comforter. Is it wrong that my first thought is: *will we all fit in here on this thing?* Because the thought of being separated from any of my boys for any length of time makes me feel almost physically ill.

I shed my clothes as quickly as I can, yanking on a gray pleated skirt and a white button-down, a sky-blue satin tie, and socks that reach my knees. The shoes are last, these shiny black Mary Janes that remind me of the shoes

Pamela used to make me and Pen wear on holidays, when we were still rich and she still pretended to give a shit about us, when Dad was alive and the Thing was a future nightmare I couldn't have possibly fathomed.

As soon as I'm dressed, I tear out of that room like a bat outta hell and run straight into Victor's strong, wet chest. He's clearly just gotten out of the shower, beads of moisture clinging to his inked skin as he rests a palm on either side of the hallway, his obsidian gaze boring down into me.

"Bernadette," he murmurs, and then he's shoving me back into the room and pinning me against the wall. Victor's mouth descends on mine, a slice of hot fury that burns me even as it soothes away all of my pain, all of my questioning, any lingering doubts that I might've had.

His tongue parts my lips like a spoken order, like he really is a king and I'm a loyal subject desperate to obey. Why I feel like this around him, I'm not sure, but I like it. When I'm with Victor, I don't have to worry or wonder. He'll take care of me, of us, of everything. In his arms, that's where I feel the safest.

"Is there anything you need?" I whisper, trembling as he bands his strong fingers around my upper arms, making dents in the heather gray sleeves of the jacket.

Victor takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and then opens them again, unleashing the hurricane force of his stare on me.

"You."

The towel around his hips drops to the floor as he steps back to examine me in the uniform, swiping his hand over his face with a curse. His temper is barely restrained right now. I can see the edges of it in the veins in his arms and neck, a muscle working in his jaw as he struggles to keep that beast restrained.

For now.

First chance he gets to launch it at Ophelia, and she isn't making it out of this city with a pulse.

"The uniform really cinches the deal, doesn't it?" he whispers, eyes sparkling, and I can't decide if he asked me to put it on just because he's a fucking perv who wants to nail me in what's essentially a Catholic schoolgirl uniform (although Oak Valley Prep has no religious affiliation) or if it's something else, something more. Proof that he can take care of me. Proof that he can raise us all up. Proof that this will all be worth it in the end. "You look

every bit as aristocratic as Trinity Jade. Or Ophelia. More so, actually.”

“Should I add the crown?” I whisper back, feeling that intensity between us stretch and quiver and pull, my obsession feeding into his obsession until we’re just an endless loop of need and want and possession. Victor Channing is *mine*, and I don’t care about the fake fiancée charade we have to keep up: I’m going to remind every student on this campus at every opportunity I can that I can kiss Vic, fuck Vic, own Vic whenever I goddamn well please.

Trinity is going to hate me for it.

“The crown would definitely add to the appeal,” Victor growls, stepping forward and sliding his hands up and underneath my skirt to cup my ass. “But I’m not about to let you leave to go look for it. You asked if I needed you? Well, I do.”

He drops one of his big hands between my thighs, lightly stroking up the seam of my cunt. He finds it easily, even with the barrier of my panties between us. I’m already wet, soaking the fabric and making him grumble in pleasure at the damp feeling against his calloused fingers. Because he’s an animal, because he’s the basic, primal male to the wild, unrestrained female inside of me, he can’t resist tugging the fabric of my underwear aside to get to my bare cunt.

With heavy bedroom eyes, Victor drinks me in, slicking a single finger between my folds and groaning when he feels exactly how hot and slick I am between the thighs. His cock pulses and throbs with the need to fill me up, to conquer that space and make it his own. I can’t seem to look away as he slips two fingers inside of me, making my lips part with a pleased sigh as my head falls back against the wall.

It’s obscene really, to fuck in this uniform before I’ve even attended a single class in it, but what can I do? My boss needs me, doesn’t he? My husband. The king to my queen.

When Victor withdraws his hand from my panties, I almost scream. He smirks at me, like he can sense exactly how I’m feeling as he adjusts his grip from my most private parts to his own, using my lube to slick his fist up and down the length of his swollen cock.

“I know all the things you say about me,” he says, almost as if it’s a challenge, a smirk building on his mouth as he regains that control, pulling it around himself like a blanket. Watching it happen is nothing short of miraculous.

“What things?” I query back, my cheeks flushed, my nipples so hard that the lace of my bra feels suddenly like a torture device.

“That I’m basic,” he growls, dropping first to one knee and then the other, hand still stroking and playing with his cock. “That I’m an animal, that all I know how to do is rut like a dog in heat.”

“I never said that verbatim,” I retort, but it’s too late. Victor has to prove that he still has control over himself, despite his reaction to Ophelia’s taunts. He reluctantly releases the grip on his dick just long enough to drag my panties down my legs and then pull them off, tossing them aside and then encouraging me to spread my legs.

His hands cup my ass as his face falls between my thighs, his tongue sliding hot and wicked across my cunt in just such a way that my knees quiver. *Shit, fuck, son of a bitch.* He eats me out like it’s a pleasure, a rite of passage, something to be savored and enjoyed. It most certainly isn’t a chore, the way Vic goes about doing it.

My eyelids droop, but I force them to stay open so I can stare down at his crown of purple-dark hair. When my fingers find it and grab hold, he growls at me, his face still pressed tightly to me, sucking and licking and nipping at my clit and folds.

Victor bands an arm across my belly when I start to collapse, effectively pinning me to the wall. It’s insane how strong he is, how the muscles in his arm lock in place and keep me there even as I push at him with my hands, my nails cutting grooves through his tattoos.

“Vic,” I murmur, as he keeps his head beneath the pleats of my skirt, mouth working against my body like a starving man. His tongue is hot and vicious, carving valleys through my flesh that make my lids flutter closed. My hands spasm, digging into the fabric of my skirt and, conversely, the top of his skull. “Fuck, I can’t do this.”

A sound escapes that I struggle to control, echoing in the nearly empty bedroom as I dig my fingers in even harder, the orgasm riding me the way I’m sure Victor wants to but that he won’t allow himself to do. Not right this second, not when he’s feeling this way. Even though the thought of him riding me in wild, unrestrained abandon gets me so hot that I can barely breathe through the idea.

“Maybe I could ... I could lay down ...” I pant, but he ignores me.

Damn if I can stop him when he’s getting what he wants.

With his right arm still banded over my midsection, Victor works the fingers of his left hand into the scalding heat of my core. At the same time, he makes sure to work his tongue around my clit, gently sucking the hardened nub into his mouth before grazing it with his teeth. My hips buck up against his face, but he holds me still, pinning me in place until a climax rips through me like those flames I saw in his eyes just a few minutes earlier.

My body spasms around his hand, a groan slipping past my lips that I can't control. But there's certainly no rest for the wicked as he shoves up to his feet, grabs me by the skirt, and yanks me forward. I'm tossed onto the bed, face-first, and then Vic is doing exactly what he wants to do by mounting me from behind.

His cock is scalding and almost too thick at this angle, making me scream as he drives into me hard and fast. That's when his control finally reaches its tipping point, and he fists a hand in my hair, yanking my head back and fucking me with just a *fraction* of that violent, unrelenting rage.

The insistent friction of his cock burrowing into me, and the wild, masculine sounds he makes sends me over the edge yet again, and then I'm coming clamped around him, my muscles working his body until he spills his seed inside of me.

With a final thrust and one, last agonizing groan, Victor collapses on top of me, breathing hard and curling his fingers through my own on either side.

"Feel better?" I whisper, and he gives a dark chuckle, his huge body crushing me into the mattress just the way I like. I could live in this position, with him still inside of me, pinning me down like a butterfly who has no wish to escape.

"You always make me feel better, Mrs. Channing," he murmurs, nuzzling against the side of my head before climbing to his feet and leaving me feeling cold and needy and irritated all at once. How is it fair that I have to conquer a whole new school today when I just became queen of my last one? How is it fair that I can't spend all day in bed with these boys when that's the only thing in the world I feel like doing right now? "Come on, wife. I'll help you clean the cum off, so you don't have it running down your legs on the first day of class."

"I seriously fucking hate you sometimes," I grumble as I push myself up into a standing position and find myself facing down Victor Channing the way I did in the hall that first day of school, when he called me a ballsy bitch,

and I snapped right back at him. He captures my chin in his fingers and stares me down with such a genuine look of love and affection that it's impossible for me to say anything snarky or cranky or distinctly south Prescott in nature.

"Well, I seriously fucking love you all of the time," he tells me, and I groan, letting my lids fall closed because I just know that I'm not getting out of this room without saying it back.

"I love you, too, you fucking asshole," I grumble, and he chuckles, planting one last kiss on my overheated mouth before sending me off to face an entire school full of spoiled rotten prep school brats.

Because I'm just that much of a south Prescott ho, I decide to slip a tampon in instead of showering down, so I can carry a little piece of Victor Channing around with me all goddamn day long.

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CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

Alright, let's do this.

I push open the doors to my first class of the day and I swear to you, there isn't a student in that room who doesn't turn to look at me. *First contact. Earth has finally been visited by aliens.*

Trinity's expression doesn't change as she takes in the ring that's now sitting pretty back on my finger. *Take a good, long look bitch,* I think, wondering if she ever really wanted to fuck my man or if it was just her brother she was into. For all I know, she's just an extremely talented actress.

Good thing I'm more than familiar with those. Oscar is a master thespian, of course.

I move down the steps toward where her majesty sits, pausing beside her and planting my hands on my hips. I've rolled the waistband of my skirt up the way the Prescott High cheerleaders do before they kick the Fuller girls' asses and tear out their extensions with nails that could make Michelangelo cry. That shit is *art*.

"Mind if I sit here?" I ask as the teacher—this uptight man in a gray suit—stares at me like I've just taken a shit on his classroom floor. I smack my gum, content to wait in silence as Trinity takes me in from my feet to my bloodred hair to my eyes, half-lidded and lazy. I'm not afraid of her, and I'm certainly not afraid of any asshole in this school.

"If you must," is Trinity's only response as I slide onto the bench seat

beside her. The room is tiered, like an auditorium or a gymnasium or something. The teacher stands up front like he's on a stage, shaking his head as he goes back to his lesson plan. He doesn't bother to introduce me to the class, doesn't even acknowledge me. Glad to see that classism runs thick in this place.

I smack my gum again and Trinity cringes.

"Could you not do that?" she asks finally, after I do it three or four more times. I glance her direction, noticing the way her hand shakes as she attempts to answer some questions on her iPad, tapping the stylus against the screen as the teacher's voice drones by like so much background noise.

I'm not here for the education, y'all.

"I'm surprised you're not in mourning for poor James," I say, and just the sound of his name makes Trinity's skin prickle with goose bumps. She hates me so much that I can see her repulsion in her skin, written there the way the story of my life is written in ink across my own body. I lean back in the seat and my pleated skirt rides up dangerously high, exposing the tail of the dragon tattoo that graces my hip.

Trinity's eyes fixate on it before lifting up to my face.

Her expression is empty and blank, like a shell of a person. Regardless, I can practically *smell* her disdain.

"Without me, Maxwell Barrasso would've rounded up your little baby gang already. You're lucky you're still here and not on the chopping block during one of his special auctions." She turns back toward the front of the room, stylus hovering over the screen of her iPad. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to focus on my schoolwork. Unlike you, I have my sights set on an Ivy League education."

I just smile at her. And I keep smiling at her until she turns to look at me again. I don't even have to say a fucking thing to piss her off. Just seeing my ratchet ass in her fancy prep school is infuriating enough.

"What?" she snaps, but I just turn slowly toward the front of the room, unsurprised to find that I have absolutely no idea what's going on in this class. Prescott High is part of the lowest tax bracket in the entire state. How can we be expected to compete? The only way to destroy the wealth gap and bring the best, brightest minds to the forefront of society is to equally fund public schools regardless of tax bracket. But I'm sure Trinity wouldn't give a shit about any of that.

“I’m just thinking of all the ways to make a person bleed,” I say, and then I park my chin in my hand and pretend like I actually give a fuck what the teacher has to say. The only reason I get through it is because I’m sore between the thighs from Vic’s monster cock. I snap my gum again and Trinity clenches her teeth.

At lunch, I find Victor standing in the cafeteria in his gray jacket and blue tie. He glances my way when I move up to stand beside him, his intimidating bulk an obscene blotch against the genteel aristocracy that slithers through this prep school like a nest of snakes.

“Disgusting, isn’t it?” he asks me as I turn back to look at them, a sea of identical jackets and ties and silver spoons shoved up too-tight assholes.

“Putrescent. Remind me what we’re doing here again.” I make a hissing sound of disgust as Trinity lifts her hand and waves for Victor to join her at a table in the center of the room. They don’t have cafeteria food here, by the way. They eat from a *menu*. There are waiters.

I remember this book I read once, written by a girl who attended Burberry Preparatory Academy—one of the wealthiest private schools in the country. She talked about this, this ... restaurant-esque quality to her school lunches. I was disgusted then. Now, looking at it in person, I kind of want to puke.

I miss Prescott High already.

“God.” I gag on the eleganza of the whole scenario, wishing I were at Wesley’s with a greasy burger and fries with a side of ranch. “How many months until graduation?”

Victor’s mouth twitches, and the only reason I find any reason to be in good spirits at all is that he looks so fucking delicious with that gray jacket tugging at the broad expanse of his shoulders that I could just cry.

“June twelfth is graduation day,” Vic tells me, and I force my brain to shut down so I can’t calculate exactly how many months away that is. My jaw works for a moment before I shake my head.

“I can’t do it,” I say, backing away from the room as Trinity shoots a frown our way that’s so severe it’s likely to leave a permanent mark across the bottom of her pretty face. I guess *she* was under the impression that Victor would, like, still humor her by eating at her table the way he did at the lodge. Unfortunately for her, the humiliation of having her peers see me all over his dick while he gives her the cold shoulder is part of the fun. They’ll know she’s supposed to be engaged to him, but also that even if he is a poor boy

from the wrong side of the tracks, he couldn't give two fucks less about her. "I don't want to eat in here. Let's get chips from the vending machine or something."

We exit out the cafeteria doors just in time to run into the other boys.

And I must say, I have to take a moment to appreciate the view.

The Havoc Boys are gorgeous when they're wearing skeleton masks, when they're naked, when they're all dressed in black and smoking out by the dumpsters. But this? All of them dressed in ties and jackets that are identical to every other student here yet somehow still expressive of their distinct personalities, that is truly a sight to behold.

My breath catches, and I have to put a hand back on the side of the brick building behind me to keep from swaying at the sight. It's that intoxicating, to see my boys all gussied up and scowling as they plow through the crowd of obscenely wealthy students like one might saunter through a swarm of mosquitoes.

Hael's tie is undone and hanging crooked and wrinkled around his neck while Oscar is so perfectly put together that the creases in his slacks look like they could cut. Aaron's jacket is off, slung over one arm, the top few buttons of his shirt undone. Callum, on the other hand, has paired an Oak Valley Prep hoodie over the top of said jacket, the hood flipped up to hide his blond hair. And Vic? Well, it's the way he carries that book bag, tossed casually over one shoulder, a pack of cigarettes making a rectangular indent in his pants pocket that really sets the mood.

"I take it you're not unhappy with us in these uniforms?" Aaron asks, his green-gold eyes sweeping over me appreciatively. When I left the bathroom earlier, tampon in place, and waltzed into the living room, I thought I might melt under the intensity of their collective stares.

There isn't a letter in that fucking acronym that doesn't like me wearing a short, pleated skirt and waltzing around in knee-high socks and Mary Janes.

"The uniforms are hot, I won't lie," I tell him, enjoying the stares of the Oak Valley students as they meander past us. Pretty sure most of them are making adjustments to their daily routines just so they can sweep past and take a look at us for themselves. There are quite a few faces in the crowd that I recognize from Prescott parties, faces that probably wish I didn't recognize them since most of my memories are of them fucking, smoking, or drinking. Maybe even worse things. I flip off a random cluster of students and they

scurry away like frightened mice.

“The uniforms are fine,” Oscar hisses, his silver eyes sweeping the crowd in a cold, calculating sort of way. He doesn’t even need to flip anyone off to get them to start running. “It’s being stared at like a zoo specimen that I don’t like.”

“They’ll get over the novelty of it soon enough,” Hael adds as he steals that pack of cigarettes from Vic’s pocket and gestures toward an inviting swell of shadow between two buildings. Ah, and here we go, back to smoking in secret like the naughty little Prescott brats that we are. “Trust me. Once the thrill wears off, they’ll start with the mocking and the jeering and then we’ll get to kick some ass and show them what it truly means to be afraid.”

Hael takes off for the shadows and I follow along, Callum falling into place on my right side.

“I thought you should know,” he begins, tucking his hands into the pockets of his slacks and giving a slight grimace at the very notion of having to wear a uniform. “I have gym with a couple of boys who’ve kept in touch with Donald Asher.”

I stop walking. So does Vic. Actually, when I glance around, I see that all five of the Havoc Boys are staring at me, waiting to see my reaction to the news. It didn’t really occur to me until just now that I’d be attending school where my would-be rapist used to go. I mean, just one look at the boys’ dorm and it’s impossible to forget that horrible sluggish feeling of the roofies or the surprise of seeing that awful text message on his phone. But truthfully, I’d almost forgotten about that douche.

“Yeah?” I query back, feeling briefly lightheaded as I look into Callum’s ineffably calm and undeniably soothing stare. His eyes really are the color of the sky, but not just any sky, the sky on the best day of your life, when you look up and all you see is blue for miles and miles.

“Well, they showed me some pics of him on their phones. You can still vaguely see ...” Cal trails off and traces a blue-nailed finger across his forehead. “My artistic handiwork, but he’s clearly had several laser treatments. Eventually, it’ll be gone. Also, he’s gotten testicular implants, but it doesn’t stop the other boys from calling him No-Nuts. He doesn’t seem to have many friends left.”

“Basically,” Oscar continues, as smoothly as if they rehearsed this conversation before delivering the news to me. Shit, for all I know, they

might have. “What we’re asking is: is it enough? Do you want us to do more?”

Aaron watches me as Hael perches on the edge of a knee-high brick wall, one that surrounds an ancient tree, creating a planter box that’s currently flush with purple crocuses. In just a few weeks, it’ll be spring, and the campus gardeners—hah, campus gardeners—will likely plant something new here, something pretty and colorful and nothing at all like you’d see at Prescott High. We had a few planter boxes here and there, but they were filled with dandelions and shit. Usually a few stray pieces of garbage. Some discarded cigarette butts.

“I want to see him for myself,” I answer finally, and Vic shares a long look with Oscar before nodding briefly. “That’s possible?” I continue, glancing between the two of them. “You know where to find him?”

“We know,” Vic answers, and then the six of us take a quick cigarette break in the shade before the bells toll, signaling the end of lunch.

After school, Cal leads us across the campus like he’s lived here a hundred years and knows every fucking shortcut there is to know. We get the keys to our cars from the valet—Jesus, this place is like the goddamn twilight zone—and we head into the ritziest part of Oak Park, to a café that sells coffee that legit gets shit out of a wildcat’s ass. It’s called like, kopi luwak or some shit, and it really and truly is coffee made out of beans eaten by an Asian palm civet cat and then crapped right back out.

That’s what rich people do with their money: eat cat crap.

“Thirty-five dollars for a cup of coffee that may as well be kitty litter?” I choke as we step inside the fancy-ass establishment with its highbrow idiot consumers. Back in the day, coffee producers would just search for the cat dung and sell it—apparently the cats only eat the highest quality coffee cherries and the animal’s digestive enzymes do ... something that makes it taste good.

Now, with the industry booming, humans have ruined things the way they always do: most of the kopi luwak sold is from caged wildcats force-fed crappy coffee cherries the way geese are brutally force-fed to make foie gras.

Yep, another ‘ridiculous political cause’ for me to hunt down and be annoyed by. Like, for real-real, I absolutely hate rich people. Mostly billionaires. Billionaires are the devil. Trillionaires are like ... anti-matter that consumes and feeds on society like a cancer.

Eventually, we find Donald, sitting alone at a table in the corner with his phone in his hand and the faintest whisper of the word *Rapist* scrawled across his forehead. How the boys knew to find him here, I'm not sure. Since this is part of my list fulfillment, I decided not to ask. The mystery is what makes it fun.

As soon as our shadows fall over Don, he glances up and there's this moment of instant recognition. Sure, on the night of the assault, we were wearing masks, but I know that the second he lays eyes on us, that he's already heard the rumors, that he already knows Havoc was responsible.

Whether or not he remembers that 'southside whore' he bragged to his friends about, I'm not sure.

"Holy fucking shit," he breathes, and then I see it, the quickening of his pulse, the way his hands shake, the frantic bounce of his knee as he jostles his foot against the stained concrete floor. "You."

"Me," I reply, giving him my best wolf's smile, my dog of war smile, my *Havoc* smile.

"You're the one that ..." Donald trails off, his attention moving from me to Vic, from Aaron to Hael, Oscar to Callum. He turns his shit-brown gaze back to me again, fear streaking through him like lightning. The background noise of the café is pleasant enough—even if they do serve cat crap coffee. I take a seat across from Don and he has a visibly strong reaction to my presence.

"Do you remember when you roofied my drink?" I ask him, leaning forward and really getting a good look at his face. "When you invited your friends to get a taste of a southside whore?"

Don just stares at me like he's Scrooge and this is some old-timey story where I'm the ghost of Christmas motherfucking past, and he's actually allowed redemption of some sort. The thing is, this isn't his story: it's mine. It's always been mine.

"Answer my wife. *Now.*" Victor snarls those words out in just such a way that Donald startles, like he's just had those brand-new balls of his kicked.

"I remember," Don manages to choke out, shrinking in on himself. "The rumors ... Havoc ..." He swallows a lump in his throat, Adam's apple bobbing, the debonair rich-boy brat he used to be long gone and likely so damaged that he won't make another appearance in this lifetime. "You've come back to kill me."

I keep smiling, really trying to savor the joy I feel in this moment,

watching a monster be hunted by bigger and better and kinder monsters.

This is exactly why I wanted to see Don, a nightmare from my past reduced to ashes. It makes the awful memories of him more palatable somehow, the way seeing Neil Pence buried alive did.

“Not yet,” I tell him, giving him a look that I hope he takes very, very seriously. “But we will. If I *ever* hear about you hurting another girl, you will suffer. And don’t think we can’t find you. No matter where you run, no matter where you hide. Be it in this country or any other, I will use the billions of dollars my husband is inheriting to make sure that you suffer.”

Don flinches, and I wonder briefly if I shouldn’t just have him killed. But then, seeing the way he shrinks and cowers and shakes is too much fun.

“Do something good for the world, Donald, or we’ll find you—I can promise that.” I sit back in the chair and then nod toward the door. “Now, get the fuck out of here before I change my mind.”

The rich pompous dickhead scrambles out of his seat, leaving his kitty litter coffee behind. Frankly, I’d rather drink my own piss, so I push it aside as the boys pull up chairs around me. For once, we’re not being stared at like we don’t belong here—the Oak Valley uniforms make it look as if we do—and I decide that I don’t like that either.

I don’t want to blend in; I want to stand out.

“Shall I order us a round of coffee?” Oscar asks, and I nod, lifting up a single finger in warning.

“But it cannot be cat crap coffee, just the regular stuff,” I say, and he laughs. He actually *laughs* at me in a way that isn’t derisive or mocking or dry. A shiver takes over me as Oscar stands up, Hael joining him at the counter to help carry the order.

“You’re sure you’re okay with this?” Vic clarifies, his hand sliding up and under my skirt so that he can stroke the silky inside of my thigh. That’s when the shiver turns into a quaking heat that I know I’ll have to slake before the day is out. We haven’t been fucking nearly enough. Granted, we survived a school shooting, a miscarriage, and enrollment at a school for people who think cat poop makes a delicious hot beverage, but I don’t intend on finishing out my senior year as a nun.

“I’m okay with it,” I say, glancing over at him. “Donald isn’t worth our time. Did you see the look on his face? You neutered him.” My mouth twitches and I find that I’m having trouble keeping the grin off my face.

“Physically *and* emotionally. Besides, the last thing we need to do is put a body in the ground when we’re so close to having all the others swept under the rug as a result of the GMP.”

“Police Girl incoming,” Aaron murmurs as Cal’s blue eyes target Sara Young through the window, and I sigh.

I’m not surprised to see her here, to be honest: she’s been trying to get ahold of me since Friday.

I stand up before she can approach our table, meeting her halfway across the café with my arms crossed over my chest.

“I have to say, you look lovely in that uniform,” she tells me as Constantine peruses the menu on the wall above the counter.

“Kopi luwak,” he says, whistling sharply. “Thirty-five dollars a cup? For cat shit?”

My mouth twitches, and I try not to hate him just a tad less than I did a minute prior.

“Thanks. What do you want?” I ask as Sara glances over my shoulder and lifts a hand in greeting to the boys, her mouth stretched tight. She readjusts her attention over to me.

“Do you want to talk about why you went to Portland and visited a club owned by the GMP? Oh, and also, the racetrack thing, could you stop doing that? We’ve traced your routes, so we know all about your shortcuts and your secrets.” Sara turns her head from side to side in time with those two words—shortcuts and secrets—in a way that reminds me of the mother I used to wish I had. One who was kind, but who also cared enough to be concerned if it looked like I was faltering or flagging in life.

If Ms. Keating and Sara Young had been my parents, I’d be a whole different person than I am right now.

“I don’t hate you anymore,” I tell her, and she lifts a brow, dressed in a casual suit with a loose silken blouse underneath, very FBI of her. “Just thought you should know that. Also, I have no idea what you’re talking about. My friend Vera was supposed to work a party and then got freaked-out at the last second. She called us for a ride, but by the time we got there, she had some guy picking her up.” I roll my eyes, and I don’t care if Sara believes me or not. It’s a good enough story and kind of close to the truth, too.

“How did you get into Oak Valley Prep?” she asks, like she’s fascinated by

me at the same time she simultaneously wishes for me to be both good and also evil, just so she can be right and bust my ass. “Your grades at Prescott High were atrocious—although I have to say, that Ms. Keating only ever has wonderful things to say about you.”

“How is Ms. Keating by the way?” I ask, shifting slightly and catching a brief glance of my reflection in one of the large windows that looks out onto the oak-lined street. I don’t look like me right now, like Bernadette Savannah Blackbird. Shit, I could almost pass for one of those rich, spoiled assholes in my short, pleated skirt and jacket. “I can tell you matter-of-factly: the bald-headed, middle-aged dude that works as the VP for Oak Valley doesn’t have one-tenth of her charisma or her integrity.”

“Breonna Keating is doing just fine,” Sara says, still smiling at me as café patrons stream around us and Constantine orders an espresso at the counter. “Did you know that she risked her life to save some of your peers? Instead of locking herself in her office as per the school’s active shooter protocol, she braved the hallway, took a shot to the arm, and rounded up all the kids who were cutting class or smoking. She got them offsite and made the first call to the police.”

A soft laugh escapes my throat, and I shake my head. Fuck me. Breonna is one in a goddamn million, isn’t she?

“And also, nice change of subject, but I’d really love to know how you and your boys managed to take half of Oak Valley’s scholarship spots for displaced Prescott students. Oscar Montauk, I can see since he was on track to be the valedictorian.” Sara exhales and crosses her arms over her chest, mimicking my pose. “And Victor Channing, good grades, connections via his mother ...” And here she trails off in just such a way that I know she’s no fan of Ophelia Mars. “But the rest of you? No offense, Bernie, but I know a trick when I see one.”

My turn to sigh. Also, to decide how much information to give her without falling into snitch territory. I decide that children being purchased by pedophiles supersedes the snitch rule entirely.

“I won’t go into details with you, but like, two of the schoolboard members have husbands who tried to buy kids to abuse. We found out about it and blackmailed them. Does that help your neat little world make a bit more sense?”

Sara just stares at me for so long that I wonder if I haven’t made a mistake,

if she isn't going to take this information and use it to finally nail our asses to the proverbial cross.

"I just want you to know that your mother has now been officially charged with your sister's murder," Sara says, her smile grim, her expression dark. She reaches out a hand and rests it comfortably on my shoulder. When I don't immediately throw her off, she gives a small squeeze. My pulse races, the sloshing of blood in my head so loud and so deafening that I almost miss the next thing that leaves Sara Young's mouth. "And ... I want to apologize to you."

"Apologize?" I ask, that one word cutting through the pain and horror of her previous statement in a way that nothing else could. Constantine takes a seat at a table nearby, within earshot but far enough away that it feels like my conversation with Sara is private. "About what?"

"About ... the plea deal," she says, sighing and dropping her hand to her side. "About asking you to testify." I'm still staring at her like she's grown horns, but Sara's smile never falters. She sweeps a loose piece of blond hair back from her forehead and takes a deep breath. "I'm sure you've heard by now about Ivy Hightower."

Ivy.

Shit.

I'd almost forgotten about Ivy ... almost. Then again, you never really do forget the sight of your boyfriend coming in the house after getting his ass kicked by the former chief of police turned local VGTF lackey and telling you about the dead girl on your other boyfriend's front lawn.

"I've been a little busy today, to tell you the truth. First day at a new school and all that. Why?"

Sara sighs again and moves toward the counter, gesturing me to follow. I glance briefly over my shoulder to see all five letters of Havoc watching me intently. It's comforting to know that in the event of a crisis, I'd have all of them at my back, ready to kill for me, ready to die for me.

I wonder if they know that I'd die for them, too?

"Can I buy you a coffee? A pastry?" Sara asks, waiting for me next to the register. I step up beside her and select a chocolate croissant from inside the glass display case, pointing it out to the salesgirl before informing her that I'd love a coffee—sans cat shit, thank you very much.

We end up at a table much farther away from Constantine than I think he

likes, but also a bit too far from the boys for *my* liking. But I concede, if only to hear what the fuck this news about Ivy Hightower is.

“If you haven’t heard already—and I assume you will shortly—Ivy Hightower was an informant of mine.”

I just stare across the table at Sara Young and try to decide what it is I’m supposed to be feeling right now. Pamela and Penelope ... I shut the thoughts down with an iron door, one crafted of self-preservation and twisted hope. Any lingering ideas I had about Pam valiantly accepting that she would go down for Neil’s death, if only to make up for her past transgressions, has been dashed. Also, finding out that Ivy was Sara’s informant both makes a ton of sense and also infuriates me. Likely, that’s the reason we found her dead on Aaron’s front lawn in the first place.

“Your informant,” I repeat, and Sara nods, even though I wasn’t asking a question. I lift my coffee to my lips and take a sip, enjoying it black while Sara loads hers with enough cream and sugar to choke an Asian palm civet cat.

I drag my phone from the pocket of my gray blazer and do a quick search. Sure enough, there it is, plastered over every local news site and several national news sites as well. *Local Girl Killed While Under the Protection of the Violent Gang Task Force.*

I look up. Sara’s face is sad and distant, but there’s no less steel in her expression than before. If anything, she looks even more determined than usual. When I set my coffee cup down, and it clinks against its saucer, she finally turns back to me.

“I put Ivy in danger, and I shouldn’t have asked the same of you. I’m glad you’re safe at Oak Valley.” She pauses and sits back as I scroll the article. Apparently, Ivy’s body was found on an *unnamed piece of rural property near Veneta*. Tom’s property.

“Neil killed her?” I say, and I phrase it as a question. I mean, thus far that was just theory on our part anyway. But Sara’s slight nod gives me a sense of ... not peace, exactly, but understanding. Everything makes sense now. Every person in my story is connected, somehow, to the Grand Murder Party.

“I want you to know that everything you’ve ever told me, I’ve taken to heart,” Sara continues, exhaling sharply and glancing in Constantine’s direction, like maybe she’s about do something she shouldn’t but is planning on it anyway. She flicks her doe-eyes back to mine as I pick at the edge of

my croissant with my perfect fingernails. Vera's aunt is basically a nail goddess. Not sure if I'll ever be this happy with another nail artist for as long as I live. "That tip about Neil's father and brother ... You've given me all the ammunition I need, Bernadette."

"How so?" I ask, thinking about all the times I wished I could call the cops on Neil, report him to the authorities, all the times the Thing and Pam got in trouble and found their records wiped clean.

"I can't talk about the details of an active investigation," Sara begins, sipping her milky coffee carefully and giving me a look that I know I'm supposed to read into. "But the connections between those two men and the GMP are astounding."

I just stare back at her, the clinking of cups and the dancing of silverware a comforting murmur of normality in a life that's been anything but normal thus far, that's likely to be anything but normal ever again. But in a good way, the best way, because if Neil's family goes to prison, and Pam goes to prison, and the GMP is neutered and twisted by the VGTF, and they stop selling and hurting kids ... what could happen to me?

Could I live a fabulous life surrounded by men that I love? Could I be a queen in so many other ways beside violent, dark, shadowed ones?

Something strange happens inside of me, this odd bubbling sensation that feels like a champagne bottle about to burst. Like fireflies dancing. Like the feel of hot fingers on your skin after you come inside from the rain. *Happiness.*

Pamela's face flickers into view again, but I crush it down.

This could really be it, the end of everything I've ever suffered. The bodies on Tom's land blamed on the GMP, the deaths of the Charter Crew, the atrocities of the Pence family. All of it wrapped neatly into a black silken bow.

"Anyway, what I meant to say was ... I'm sorry. You and your boyfriends,"—and here her mouth twitches slightly—"should try to enjoy your time at Oak Valley. I'm leaving your police detail outside the school, just in case. But for now, at least, I'm not pursuing any charges against you." She levels a look on me that also very clearly says, *just because I'm being nice now doesn't mean I don't suspect y'all of mayhem and chaos elsewhere.* "I would, however, like to know about Heather Pence. And Kara and Ashley Fadler."

Motherfucker.

“We’ve hidden them from the GMP,” I say, taking another sip of my coffee. “Wouldn’t you do the same, if they were your sisters?”

Sara’s mouth pinches, and I know this goes against her clear-cut rules of what’s right and what’s wrong, but eventually, she just sighs and gives me a look.

“You used your contacts to get them into Oak River, didn’t you?”

I say nothing, but fuck this woman for being perceptive beyond belief.

“Well, after failing to track down Aaron’s mother, I’m starting to put together a picture, one where the care of two minor children are in the care of yet another minor child.” She glances across the café toward where Aaron sits, his mouth in a pretty sulk, a chestnut curl flopped onto his forehead. A minor ... child. With his jacket off, and his white button-down undone at the top, showing just the faintest dusting of chest hair. Child. Hilarious. Sara looks back at me. “Besides that, CPS is aware that Heather has been living with you until recently.”

CPS. Child Protective Services. An organization I stopped trusting the day Coraleigh left Penelope and me with the Kushners. I’d rather die than give Heather or Kara or Ashley up to a system that doesn’t care.

“They’re safe,” I tell Sara, leaning back in my chair and crossing my arms over the front of my stupid ass prep school uniform. It’s like, as soon as Oak Valley started using this hideous Catholic schoolgirl rip-off uniforms, I swear to fuck, every other school within three hundred miles started doing the same.

Jesus H. Christ, but I hate mimics.

Just because one prep school does it, doesn’t meant the rest of them need to start going all *Single White Female* and trying to wear Oak Valley’s pompous skin.

“They might be safe, but you and your husband will need to legally challenge Heather’s custody with the court. Because you’re emancipated, you have a chance to fight this. Aaron ... is in a much worse position than that.”

“Sara—” I start, ready to go full fucking Prescott on her. If there’s one thing I cannot be reasoned about, it’s the care of those goddamn kids. I’d rather take off and run, forgo the inheritance and the future of Prescott and even leave the pedo ring in place to protect my family. But, interestingly enough, it seems like I might not have to do that.

Having finished her coffee, Sara stands up and looks down at me with a

curious expression on her face, like something about me has managed to surprise her. Guess she's managed to surprise me, too, because I almost, sort of, kind of like her a little bit. Almost.

"Anyway, dealing with minor child placement and custody issues is not a part of my job description." She gives a small sigh and shakes her hands out, like she can't believe she's actually doing this. "Send me a picture of the girls today, so I can see that they're alright and I'll let CPS do their own work."

I let out a sharp exhale as Sara turns away, collecting Constantine near the front door before slipping outside and heading down the street. I stay where I am, waiting for the familiar flicker of shadows, the chorus of musky male scents, and the scraping of chair legs on the floor.

When I look up, I'm surrounded by all five Havoc Boys.

"How did it go?" Aaron asks, the arms of his shirt pushed up to reveal corded forearms dressed in ink. I finish my coffee and set it aside as Cal steals my croissant and proceeds to eat it, crouched in his chair instead of seated on it. Other café patrons are staring, but screw them because they drink cat shit coffee and Cal is a hot fuck. Also, he's loyal and protective and an incredible dancer and he's all fucking mine.

"Actually," I say, glancing over at Oscar on my right, Hael seated beside him. Victor stays standing, leaning his monstrous body up against the window behind him. "It went surprisingly well. For the first time since this all started, I'm wondering if things aren't going to work out okay after all."

"They will," Oscar purrs, a nightmarish smile lighting on those pretty, peremptory lips of his. "Provided we can come up with a plan for Maxwell and Ophelia."

And he's right.

Because even if Trinity is playing along for now, and Ophelia has backed off, and Maxwell is quiet ... this isn't over yet.

In fact, it's far fucking from it.

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

“Was that really our first day?” I ask as I flop down on one of the hideous gray sofas in the living room, trying and failing to not appreciate the view outside our wall of windows. It’s pretty much fucking awesome, seeing the whole of the Willamette Valley sparkling in the distance like a handful of jewels across an ebony blanket. “Because it felt like a fucking year. Also, I’m probably going to fail every class I’m signed up for except maybe gym.” I scrub both hands over my face, dressed in a pair of BlackCraft Cult sweats with a Ouija board pattern and a tank top that says *I Have Witchcraft on my Lips*. Being in love is its own kind of magic, so I figure it’s not a total lie.

A quick glance at my phone shows a few old messages from Sara Young asking me to call her. Since we already had a conversation today, I delete them and don’t think anything of it. I don’t ask how high when a cop tells me to jump. I’ve also got a few texts from Vera, describing in great detail her newest conquest’s cock. Actually, there’s a picture that goes along with her anecdotes. Guess we’re ride or die bitches now. I suppose helping us murder a well-known gang member kind of sealed the deal on that one.

“Why the fuck do you have a picture of some random guy’s dick on your phone?” Aaron asks, pausing behind me with shower-damp skin and a pair of pajama pants that should be illegal. They cling to his slender hips, showing off that sharp set of V-muscles and a light trail of chestnut hair that disappears under the waistband. *Fuck*.

I force my gaze away from him and back down to the dick on my phone. Honestly, it isn't that great of a dick. The head is too flared, too purple for my liking, and the veins are just out of control. A few here and there are nice, but like, this one is spider-webbed with them.

"Vera sent it to me for examination. Frankly, I'm not impressed." I tap out a message telling her so as Aaron snorts and comes around to sit on the sofa with me, his eyes taking in the apartment with a mixture of excitement and distaste that I full well understand. Like, this place is nice, and it feels safe, but it's also foreign and excessive and cold.

"I don't like you getting pictures of random cocks on your phone," Vic says from the direction of the kitchen, unloading a bag of groceries that he had delivered to the front gate about an hour ago. The security guard collected the purchase, inspected the items, and then had a courier deliver it to our room. That's how things work here, at Oak Valley Prep. There's a servant for every menial task. The edge of my lip curls up in distaste.

"Well, you can just deal, Alpha-Dick." I send the text to Vera and then set my phone aside, picking up the leather-bound journal from the table that Aaron got me for Christmas. He wrote a message on the inside that's almost too sweet to repeat, something about how I should, like, chase my dreams or something. This is where I'm going to write my poems, now that I'm not in Mr. Darkwood's class anymore. My English class here is ... way different. We're reading some shitty story called *Bartleby, the Scrivener* that makes my teeth hurt a little bit whenever I try to start it. It's that terrible. "Vera is the only possible girlfriend candidate that I have right now, and I intend on keeping her around."

Vic snorts at me, but he really isn't all that bad as he appears. He's an alpha male, sure, but he isn't a controlling misogynistic twat-waffle.

Aaron watches me poise my pen above the page and I lift my eyes to his, feeling that same warm brush of heat in my chest that I always get when we look at each other.

"I wish the girls could stay here with us," he says, glancing back at the apartment. There's plenty of space here. In fact, there are three bedrooms in total. We *could* probably finagle a way to get the girls moved into the space, but the whole point of them coming here under aliases was so that the GMP didn't know they were here in the first place. If they don't know where Kara, Ashley, and Heather are, they can't come looking for them.

And if the GMP does come looking for us ... the girls won't be around to see the bloody aftermath.

"Me, too." I set the journal down and lean into Aaron, closing my eyes as he runs his fingers through my hair. Oscar, meanwhile, hangs near the front door with Hael, installing a series of locks that Callum's chosen to keep us as safe as possible. I find the sight of a half-dozen locks comforting because it reminds me of Prescott, of home. That is, Aaron's house and not the duplex I lived in with Pam.

Pam.

Shit.

A subject I've been avoiding for weeks now.

I use my toe to lift the cover of the journal, so that I can see the wrinkled and smudged piece of paper that contains my list. Only one name remains. The most damaging name of all. The one person who led me to the Thing, to Coraleigh, to the Kushners. All along, Pamela was involved in the very same human trafficking ring as Ophelia. Shit, *Penelope and I* were involved in that.

We were sold once upon a time.

I choke on the memory and draw my foot back, letting the journal slam shut.

"Are you okay?" Cal asks, padding down the hall from the direction of the bedroom in a pair of boxer shorts and an unzipped hoodie over his bare chest. In this light, I can see all of his scars. The sleeves of his sweater are pushed back just enough that I can make out the fallen ballerina tattoo on his arm as well. "You look lost in memory." He smiles, like he well knows that feeling, that face, that sense of falling into something even when you're trying your very best to fly.

"Pamela," I say, and it's all I have to say because these boys know me so damn well that they can infer the million and one emotions that go along with that name.

Cal sits down on the sofa opposite me as I study that ballerina tattoo in earnest, and Aaron strokes my hair with strong, steady fingers. It occurs to me then that the GMP has not only taken our school from us, they've also stolen away Callum's classes at the Southside Dreams Dance Company. There's no way for him to go into town and teach safely. So, for now, even that fragment of his dream has been put on hold.

I tell myself it'll all be better later, that once Vic gets his inheritance,

Callum can build a dance studio and hire professionals and give little Prescott dancers a chance to cling onto dreams they'd never have thought possible in a million years. Because, even though Victor technically owes nothing to the rest of the Havoc Boys, I know that when he said we'd all have an equal share of the inheritance, he meant it.

"Do you want to see Pamela?" Callum asks finally, after giving me a moment to process. Hael joins him on the couch a few seconds later and lets his friend put his legs across his own. They're cute together, Cal and Hael. "If you don't, that's okay. And if you do, that's okay, too. My grandmother killed my mom. I still want to see her."

"I ..." The words get stuck in my throat. Do I want to see Pamela? It's a question I haven't let myself ask because I knew the answer would sicken me. Aaron's fingers still in my hair and his breath catches, like he can sense the direction of my thoughts. "Frankly, I just wish she would die and disappear, so I never had to think of her again."

And there it is, the reality of my strange relationship to a woman I hate so much that the very idea of her fills me with something sad and sick and broken. If she really did kill Penelope—and I feel like Sara Young is a far too careful hero to make a mistake like that—then I don't ever want to see her again. She isn't worth a single breath, a single sip of water or bite of food. The world would be instantly better off if she didn't exist.

"We can make that happen," Oscar says, pausing next to the couch in bare feet. Bare. Feet. Something about Oscar's tattooed feet make me excited in a way that I can't explain. Like, I'm damn near positive that not only was he a virgin before me, but also that nobody else has ever seen his feet like this, exposed and naked on the pale wood floors of our new apartment. "Is that what you want? You were right, about finding one of Stacey's girls in the county jail that could help us out."

I lift my eyes up to his, impossible to read behind the thick lenses of his glasses, too distant to interpret. But I have the power to bridge that gap, to see all the way down, into the twisted complexity that makes up one of the most beautifully damaged people I have ever known.

Victor joins us, his aura making the room seem impossibly small despite the fact that it's fucking huge and almost disturbingly austere.

I sit up, but I stay close to Aaron. Being close to Aaron makes me feel vulnerable but strong, too, like I can take that vulnerability and wield it as a

weapon in the same way that Victor wields his anger.

After a moment, Oscar moves away, and my heart seizes painfully in remembrance of his past fuckups, his fleeing, his leaving me alone in the cold and the dark with blood between my thighs ... But he comes back quickly and puts a glass of chocolate milk on the table in front of me, complete with straw.

“It’s a biodegradable straw,” he tells me when I lift incredulous eyes up to his stoic face, his inked fingers brushing gently against the front of his tattooed neck. “Since I know you give a lot of fucks about that sort of thing.”

“Well, technically, I think that corporations should take responsibility for their packaging and that blaming the state of our planet on straws is an irresponsible—”

Oscar leans down and captures my mouth, his fingers firm and possessive on the bottom of my chin. It’s enough to make me forget that twenty fossil fuel companies contribute a third of all carbon emissions. Shit, if climate change is going to kill us all, at least I’ll have this moment seared on my tongue like a brand.

“Just say *thank you*, Oscar and that will suffice.” He takes the seat next to me, making my stomach flip-flop dangerously. Tonight is our first night in the apartment, our chance to practice those ‘sleeping arrangements’ that Callum brought up the other day. At the safe house, we all slept in the same room. The bed was small and shitty, so the guys took turns rotating through some sleeping bags on the floor.

Here ... is different. There’s a king-size bed in all three rooms. Also, the master is large enough that we could, like, maybe push at least two of them together ...

I bite my lower lip, and the tension in the room winds into something tight and virulent. That’s what you get when you’re dating five red-blooded men all at once. They look at you the way you look at them: like something naughty and delicious that deserves to be licked. Only, I get whatever I give them back five times over.

“I have to see Pamela. Just ... not quite yet. But soon. Then I’ll decide what to do.”

The easiest thing would be to just forget about her, make her disappear, but some part of me knows that I can’t just yet. I want some answers; I have too many questions. The biggest one, I suppose, is this: will Pamela Pence

answer any of them?

Guess we'll have to wait and find out, now won't we?

"Your wish is our command," Hael says, touching his fingers to his chest and throwing me a shit-eating grin. "So, Havoc Girl, who do you wish to take to bed in that big-ass room tonight?"

A snort escapes me as I glance over at the wall of windows and the sparkling lights of Springfield in the distance. Hmm. My nails dig into the black fabric of my sweats as I consider.

"Do you think ... I mean, it'd be safest if we all stayed in the same room for a while, right?"

Aaron lifts a brow as I lean down and grab my drink off the table, a slight flush coloring my cheeks as I slip the straw between my lips. Somehow, even as he proclaimed to hate me with every breath, Oscar watched me enough to notice how much I love chocolate milk with straws, that this was my go-to drink in the Prescott High cafeteria.

"Don't talk in circles around us," Victor says, and I have to snort because I know he's referencing that first day in the library when I sat down across from these assholes and asked for their help in extracting vengeance from a cruel and vicious world. "We don't like it."

"We really don't like it," Oscar echoes, leaning back against the arm of the couch and the few decorative throw pillows there like some sort of obscenely beautiful boy-king, set to inherit the earth in his tattooed hands.

"Maybe we should all sleep in the master bedroom?" I start, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the room where Vic and I fucked this morning. "It doesn't have to be forever, but why not for now? While we finish school, while we deal with the GMP ..."

I trail off, and I realize then that I'm still doing it, that I'm still asking.

I stand up quickly, moving over to one of the duffel bags still sitting on the floor near the front door. I extract the crown that Victor got me and set it on my head, moving back into the living room as Hael and Callum chuckle and Aaron smiles softly. Vic looks contemplative, and Oscar looks ... enraptured? Is that even possible?

"What I meant to say was: we are all sleeping in the same room. Go get the other bed and drag it in there." I turn on my heel and head down the hallway as laughter rings out behind me.

But guess what?

They do it.

They put the other bed in there, wedging it in between the wall of windows and the original bed.

It should be awkward, right? All six of us lying there in the dark together. Only ... it's fucking not. Because underneath the claws and teeth, the guns and knives, the blood and pain, we're all seventeen and eighteen and lonely and desperate for connections that we can count on, love that only hurts in the best possible way, and companionship.

Family.

We find it there, in that room, in the shadows with the curtains parted and the city sparkling beyond the ring of dark woods that surrounds the school.

"Question," Hael whispers, taking up the side of the giant bed that's closest to the windows. "How do we broach the subject of sex?"

"Jesus," Aaron murmurs, but not like he isn't curious himself. He's lying on my right side, one arm banded over my stomach. Oscar is on my left, lying on his back, his profile the only part of him that I can see. Cal lies between him and Hael while Vic is on Aaron's other side, a nightstand between him and the wall.

And I love it here.

I love this.

Does it make me selfish that I want to keep this arrangement forever and ever? I can't decide. The only thing I know is that even if it does, I want it. I want it more than anything.

"The one thing about royalty," I start, quoting a song by Bohnes called "*Middle Finger*", "is that we love to feast."

I turn toward Aaron and then gently encourage him onto his back with a palm to the chest. He whispers something that I can't quite hear but that I'm pretty sure is *thank fucking god* before I start to slide that palm down his ripped abs, brushing across the thin trail of hair below his belly button. It's a delicious sensation, an anticipatory moment, before I dip beneath his waistband altogether. Even though it's dark, and I can barely see him, I've got the image of him in my mind's eye, tousling his wet hair with the towel earlier, pants clinging to his slender hips.

And oh, the sounds he makes when I wrap my fingers around the base of him and squeeze. That's poetry enough. My lips part as I scoot closer, searching out the hardened points of his nipples with my tongue.

“Oh, I see how it goes,” Hael starts, but then there’s the sound of rustling fabric and a groan from him that speaks to self-pleasure. “Hey Vicki?”

“Swear to fuck, if you call me that again ...” Victor starts, and then he lets out a long, tired-sounding sigh. But not in a bad way. More like ... he finally feels like he’s allowed to have a moment of rest? “What do you want, Hael?”

“Lube. I put like, four or five bottles in the drawer over there.”

I laugh, even as Aaron moans and bucks his hips up against my hand. Behind me, I can feel the tension in Oscar’s body. He isn’t sure what to do, and he doesn’t like that. Fuck, it’s a state the man doesn’t find himself in often. He always knows what to do. Just ... not here, not tonight.

“Rules for sex are,” I continue as the bottle of lube makes its way from Vic’s hand to mine. Our fingers tangle in the dark, driving lust and heat and fire into my body even from such a simple touch. I briefly withdraw my hand from Aaron’s pajama pants, filling my palm with a generous amount of lube before passing it behind me. It goes right over Oscar and into Callum’s hand. “Whatever the fuck we want. Anything. As long as it stays within this group and we use a safe word for any situation that makes us uncomfortable. I think *mare’s nest* would be an appropriate one, if you guys are in agreement.”

Vic gives me a saucy look, likely because he remembers offering me that same safe word during our threesome with Aaron.

“There could never be another safe word,” Cal agrees, his voice as much a part of the shadows as the darkness itself. Husky, full of depth, crafted of violence but wielded with rough pleasure.

Aaron shoves his pants down his hips, giving me better access to the velvet heat of his cock. My slick fingers find purchase around the base, my hand tightening until he finally lets out a sharp gasp, his own hand lifting up to tangle in the loose blond hair at the back of my head.

Oscar shifts again, and I realize that he’s sat up behind me. When I glance back, I see that he’s leaning against the headboard, shirtless and limned in the faintest bit of moonlight from outside the window. As soon as he sees that I’m looking at him, he puts his hand down his own pants and my breathing gets a little quicker, a little more erratic.

I turn back to Aaron, my fist turning in a corkscrew motion as his own grip tightens in my hair.

“Harder,” he says, and I feel my nipples tighten into diamond points. For someone that’s so sweet to me outside the bedroom, he definitely knows what

he wants when we're in it. I oblige him, tightening my inked left hand even more and then pumping him with a ferocity that should have him crying out in pain but instead only makes him suck in a sharp breath.

Victor adjusts himself on Aaron's other side, turning to look at us. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I can better make out the expression on his full lips: amusement. Which, knowing Vic as I do, is something I most definitely did not expect.

"Are you sure you want this? All of us sleeping in here with you every night?" he asks with a harsh laugh, stripping his own pants off and tossing them to the floor. I see that's he pulled out one of the other lube bottles from the drawer. "You'll be attending Oak Valley with a perpetually sore and swollen cunt, and I doubt you'll get a whole hell of a lot of sleep."

"If I don't like it, I have my safe word," I say, and then I drop my mouth down to Aaron's dick, tongue swirling around the head as he hisses and uses his hold on my hair to push his cock even deeper into my throat.

"Play with my balls," he murmurs, and my body flushes with heat. I love hearing him tell me what he wants, and I extra fucking love that he's not afraid to do it in front of all four of the other Havoc Boys. I slide my mouth up his cock and then adjust my attention to the tight heat of his sack, licking the silky skin and sucking it into my mouth. Behind me, I hear one of Cal's beautifully broken groans and a sound of pleasure escapes my own throat, fluttering against Aaron's balls as they tighten against the onslaught of my mouth.

He massages my scalp as I slide my tongue up toward the base of his shaft, tasting the lube there and finding it fruity and sweet, like peaches. A smirk takes over my mouth as I sit up and snag the discarded bottle that's lying next to Vic. He's just sitting there, playing with his monster cock and watching me pleasure another man with an expression akin to a king on his throne. This is all for his pleasure, his entertainment. *Dickhead.*

I steal the lube and sit up, tearing my shirt over my head and chucking it aside before squeezing a generous amount of lubricant on my breasts. Oscar's staring at me with a hunger that's so sharp that I wonder if it isn't cutting me, if he isn't making me bleed without my even knowing it.

Cal and Hael are both lying back beside him, doing their own thing, listening more so than watching.

Aaron looks down the length of his body at me as I prop myself up on one

elbow.

“Give me your hand,” I tell him, and he does, allowing me to press his palm against the silken side of my left breast. I position myself so that my tits are on either side of his cock, using my own hand to press against the opposite breast, creating a tunnel of soft flesh to surround his rigid shaft. He licks his lips, his hips rising up to take advantage of the slick plush cushion around his dick. With his hand on one side, and mine on the other, my breasts are pressed nice and tight, giving Aaron the friction he needs to really get off.

“Fuck,” Oscar grinds out, gripping his own dick so tightly that I worry he might hurt himself. He pumps his fist up and down as the moonlight catches on the little metal swords pierced through his nipples. On my other side, Victor does the same. Hael groans in unabashed pleasure while Callum’s ragged noises tear me apart and put me back together, all at the same time.

I work my breasts on Aaron’s body until his dick begins to twitch, and I worry that he might come before I get what it is that I really want: him inside of me. The nice thing is, if I accidentally push him too far, then I can use a different boy. For as long as I live, I doubt I’ll ever have to deal with the annoyance of going unsatisfied.

When I go to sit up, Aaron makes a growling sound of displeasure, and I find myself being flipped over, my arms pinned up on either side of my head. His eyes find my breasts just before his teeth do, and he bites down so hard on my nipple that I cry out, the sound echoing in the empty apartment. Only ... it’s empty in furniture and things only. In every other way, it’s full. Bursting, really.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” Aaron murmurs, mouth still pressed against my breasts, tongue teasing my nipples and probably tasting that peach lube I slathered all over them. He moves his mouth to mine, but when I arch my back up and try to kiss him, he pulls away smirking.

“You *fucker*,” I breathe as he moves his hips forward and slides his cock against the fabric of my pajama pants, the head of his dick pressing against the almost painfully swollen nub of my clit. Aaron laughs, the sound low and soft, just before he drops his hot lips to my neck, kissing and sucking on me in just such a way that I’m sure every person on campus will be able to see the mark of Havoc on my skin.

“I can be,” he murmurs, scooting back so that he can grab my sweats and slide them down and off, tossing them onto the floor before moving back

between my thighs. He cradles my head between his hands and finally drops his mouth to mine, tasting me with a sweetness that reminds me of being fifteen again, before Penelope was gone, before Callum lost his dream of dancing, before the whole world shifted and tilted and broke.

I can't say that I don't wish things had been different, but I also can't say that I'm not happy with where I am right now, using all of those broken bits to create a mosaic of stained glass that's twice as beautiful as any solid piece I might've had before. When the light hits it, it paints the world in vibrant color.

Our tongues dance together as Aaron finds my opening, sliding forward so slowly that I ache and writhe and squirm, trying to get just a little more, impale myself a little harder. He keeps complete control of the moment, but not in a domineering way like Vic or an obsessive desperation like Oscar. He just knows what he wants, and he's okay asking for it.

And what he very clearly wants is me. Us. This. All of it.

We start to move together, our hips creating this coordinated song and dance. Flesh against flesh, the sweet music of wet bodies, our fingers tangled, our eyes locked. I can hear other sounds, lewder ones, groans and curses. I can smell the tang of sex in the air as Aaron tastes my lips, making love to my tongue at the same time he does to my pussy. There are promises in his kisses, in the movements of his hips, the way his muscles tighten and quiver as he approaches his climax.

For the briefest of moments, it's just me and him again, losing our virginities to one another in a suburban bedroom on the border of Prescott and Fuller while his mother cooks downstairs and the world keeps spinning the way it always does.

The climax takes me first, and Aaron keeps me pinned in place while I quiver and shudder, my silken inner muscles clamping around him and milking him like my body wants something I'm not ready for. But, well, I've been taking the pill at the same time every day for extra assurance, so it can do whatever it wants. It feels good anyway, to complete the primal dance of mating with the boy I first fell in love with.

My body goes slack beneath his, but I keep my thighs spread wide so Aaron can use me to find his own orgasm. He pulls back from our kiss, just so he can watch me as he comes, his lids fluttering, my fingernails digging into the tight muscles of his ass he pumps hard and fast a few last times and

then collapses on top of me.

I close my eyes as his breath flutters my hair, listening to the chorus of ragged breathing in the room, trying to see if anyone else is still going. But no, it's nothing but panting and a faint chuckle from Hael's direction.

"The family that jacks it together stays together," he says, and Victor lets out an annoyed groan, chucking a pillow in his direction as I open my eyes and Aaron rolls off to lie between me and Vic.

"Thank you," I tell them, and the playful bickering ceases right away. Nobody asks what I'm saying thank you for—they know it isn't as simple and stupid as me thanking them for performing a group masturbation. It's because they love each other as much as they love me, and there's nothing but death that could ever pull the six of us apart.

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CHAPTER

NINETEEN

I manage to last two weeks at Oak Valley Prep before I give in to one of my many obsessions.

Pamela Pence.

Mother.

Murderer.

Sitting inside the county jail, I rest my elbows on the scratched surface of a small white table and wait for Pam to be brought in. Meanwhile, I tell myself that everything is okay when ... none of it is, really. None of it.

She murdered Penelope, I tell myself, but despite holding onto that knowledge for over a month, I don't believe it. Rather ... I don't want to believe it. My stepfather was the *Thing*, right? This awful, evil, barely human monster. It only makes sense that he would be the one to end my sister.

Yet ...

Pamela sits down in front of me as I raise my gaze from the surface of the table, the fingers of my tattooed left hand tracing a word scratched deeply into the plastic. *HAVOC*, it says. Because I scratched it there just now, without any of the officers in the room noticing.

"Bernadette," Pam says, smiling when she sees me. But not like she's happy I'm there, more like she's relishing the idea that I might be suffering. She must be able to see it in my face. "I've been telling that pretty young officer everything I know about your little gang."

My turn to smile back. It isn't easy, especially when I take in Pamela's disheveled appearance. I'm so used to seeing her in designer clothing, flawless makeup, and coiffed hair that the person sitting in front of me might as well be a stranger. She looks younger this way, somehow. More vulnerable. I think again about her age-gap romance with my already married father.

"Were you and dad in love?" I ask, even though I could snarkily spit back that she doesn't know shit about my 'little gang'. I mean, that'd be true. She doesn't. She doesn't know a fucking thing about Havoc or me or even Heather—especially not Penelope. Nothing. Nothing at all. "I mean, he was married when you met, and so much older. That must've been hard."

Pamela just stares back at me from emerald eyes, ones that I'm familiar with because I look in the goddamn mirror every single day and see her. The last name on my list. The very last motherfucking name.

"Are you an idiot, Bernadette?" is how she chooses to respond to that statement. She slams her hands down on the surface of the table and one of the guards calls out a warning. "I'm rotting in jail, and you're here asking about me and your father?"

"You didn't kill him, too, did you?" I ask, because as far as I know, my father hanged himself. Then again, until recently, I'd assumed my older sister had shoved a bottle of pills down her throat and ended things. Some tragedies are not what they appear. "Dad, I mean. The way you killed Penelope."

The words come up like bile, tainting my mouth and making my tongue feel sour. I crave to hold the hand of a Havoc Boy, any Havoc Boy, any at all. If I could just do that, wrap my fingers with one of theirs, I could stay calm, the way I have for weeks since I found out.

Weeks of pushing this down, walling it off, acting like it isn't real.

I grind my nail into the scratched surface of *HAVOC* on the table, just to keep my fingers from digging into Pam's eyes the way I did to James'. My other hand, I use to prop up my chin, to keep up the act, the one that says I don't care about any of this.

I'm just Bernadette Savannah Blackbird, bad bitch and gangbanger.

Only ... that's a pipe dream. I wish that I could be that girl all the time, that I never felt sad or insecure, confused or angry. Devastated. Shattered. Broken up and bleeding. But I do. I feel all those things all the time—*especially* right now.

“Bernadette,” Pam begins, giving me another look as she pushes blond hair back from her face. She looks so young right now, and so sad. Pathetic, actually. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“I mean that—in-between playing games with Neil and the Grand Murder Party—you killed Penelope. It isn’t even a question, is it? You did it. But how? That’s the thing that’s been haunting me at night, the one thing that I just cannot shake.”

We stare at each other for a long, long moment. As we do, I wonder if I haven’t made a mistake allowing Pamela to end up in jail. Now, with a huge court case coming up, and her guilt providing an avenue for the VGTF to pursue RICO charges—that is, gang-related charges—against the GMP, there’s no way for me to get to her.

I mentioned finding one of Stacey’s girls to do the dirty work, to hang her from her sheets. I may still do that.

Pam’s case is an important part of bringing down everything and everyone else: Neil (posthumously of course), his father, his brother, Ophelia, Maxwell Barrasso. Every rich fucker that’s ever purchased a child from the GMP and all that money they launder through Trinity’s mother’s foundation, Save Our Precious Children League. If she dies, the VGTF will assume that the GMP arranged it. I mean, they very well could be in the process of doing just that as we speak. I could get away with it. *Is that what you really want, Bernie? Is it?*

The answer is: I have no fucking clue.

“Did you hold a gun to her? Make her take the pills?” I keep staring at Pamela as bits and pieces of my sister’s journal filter through my head. She wasn’t planning on dying, was she? When she asked me things like, *do you think you’d be okay without me?* She was planning on running. Escaping. Going to Nan-motherfucking-tucket.

I close my eyes for a moment, my heartbeat thundering, head spinning.

I’ve held it together for five weeks since I learned about Pam’s involvement in Penelope’s death.

And yet, for the first time, I’m really fucking feeling it.

I need my boys, I think, fingers digging into the sides of the table. But I can’t leave yet. Not without hearing her say it.

“You wearing a wire or something?” Pam asks, looking me over like she can’t imagine any other reason for me to be here. There’s an immediate

tension in the air because I've already taken note of the fact that she hasn't denied my claim, hasn't sputtered and slammed her hands on the table and turned that funny pink color she does when she's mad. She isn't mad at the accusation because ... it's true.

I laugh at her, but then I feel something salty and reach up my fingers to touch the tear on my cheek. Fuck. I'm crying. Even though I told myself I wouldn't. Even though I *promised* that I wouldn't do this.

"I'm not a fucking snitch," I growl back, with so much vehemence that Pamela actually reclines in her seat. This woman who accepted ten-grand to marry me off to a gangster. Who, for years, ordered me around and screamed in my face and called me horrible names while hiding the blood on her hands. "Oh, how I wish I were right now, that I could sell you out and watch you scramble in front of the media. All your rich friends know now, don't they? Why you've been arrested. And they don't care. In fact, they're hoping you'll take the fall for it, so they don't have to pay for playing sick, little games with stolen children."

"You're a little liar and whore, just like your sister," Pamela tells me, her vitriolic words twisting inside my head like a mantra. *Liar and a whore*. But I'm neither of those things. If anyone at this table is, it would be her. "Marrying your father and having the two of you was the worst mistake I ever made. If I could go back in time, I would abort Penelope and leave your predator daddy behind."

The harsh bite of truth colors every word of that, but I don't flinch. None of that surprises me. Pamela has never liked being a mom. The very idea of it makes her feel trapped, like a butterfly with its wings torn off.

"Why didn't you just walk the fuck away?" I ask, staring her down and watching as she curls one hand into a fist, digging those chipped fingernails of hers into her palm. The way she looks down at my perfectly painted and bejeweled nails makes it plainly obvious that she's jealous. *Control*. It was all about control.

"Why did you even come here?" Pamela asks, but I'm shaking my head again, leaning in close to her so I can whisper.

"You answer my questions *now* or I'll see to it that you don't survive to your trial date."

Our eyes meet, and I notice just the briefest hesitation in her gaze, like she isn't sure if she believes me or not. It takes a while for the idea to settle, the

idea that she finally has no power over me. She can't make me sit in Neil's lap or watch Coraleigh put me in the car to take me to the Kushners.

My throat gets so tight that I suddenly find it impossible to breathe. I'm choking. I'm choking and I am so goddamn sad. Why am I so fucking sad all the time? One minute, I'll be fine. I'll know how many good things I still have in my life and how goddamn lucky I am. I've made it to seventeen-going-on-eighteen without being sexually assaulted. It's a miracle. Getting my Havoc Boys back is a miracle.

I clamp an arm over my belly as I try to hold back the tears.

The miscarriage is a distant, edgy thing at the back of my mind. I didn't want a baby, so I'm relieved. And I feel bad for being relieved. But I also know that if I did end up with a daughter, I'd know exactly how to be the perfect parent: be the opposite of Pamela. Embody love instead of hate.

I sit up and fold my arms across the surface of the table.

"Why did you marry my father?" I ask, because I need to know all of this. And, in this last moment, if Pamela can give me a scrap of something to hold onto, I'll let her live the rest of her days out in prison. Frankly, it would be a better punishment than death really. She'll hate the food and the lack of designer clothing, the absence of nail artists from Oak Park, the lack of a hairstylist with experience working on Hollywood stars. She'll hate this place because it will embody everything that she deserves: a desperate, empty, lonely cage. Forever.

At the same time, I know that my list of vengeance was not made for the people whose names ended up on it. It was designed for me, by me, and if you ever thought a personal vendetta was the only reason this story was penned, I feel sorry for you. If you thought all those soft and quiet in-between moments were filler, then you didn't understand. If you disliked me because the ugly things inside of me made you see the ugly things inside of you, then you're just as lost as I once was.

Not anymore.

Never again.

When Victor put that crown on my head, I knew that it wasn't a reward for the violence, that it wasn't a reward for bashing in James Barrasso's head. It was a reward for reclaiming myself, for falling into my own skin and finding out that I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

Mixed reviews from critics stained with blood and tears,

*The politics of a broken life are really just reality,
My words are what set me free, so if I have to be something polarizing,
Then that's exactly what I'm going to be.*

The poetry filters through my head, unbidden. I couldn't stop it if I tried. Any attempt to hold back that twisted prose would leave me writhing on the floor in agony, poisoned by it. Consumed by it. So I don't bother. I just tap my pretty nails on the table and let it come, memorizing every line of my mother's face so I know exactly the type of person that I never want to become.

"I married him for his money," Pamela says, sitting back in her orange jumpsuit and looking like a supermodel even with the faint purple circles under her eyes. She's pretty, just like me. We're both pretty and look at what a curse it is. The world simultaneously rewards and punishes pretty, doesn't it? "I'd have done anything back then to get away from your grandparents." She keeps staring at me, but like she has no idea who I am or why I'm here. "Does that answer your fucking question, you ugly little brat?"

The insult bounces off of me. She can hate me all she wants. I have people who love me, so guess what? The worst the world has to throw at me means nothing. Her ugly words can't take away the satisfaction of knowing that I've got the one thing I've always dreamed of: acceptance. A place to belong.

"Why did you want to get away from them?" I continue, realizing that this is literally the longest conversation we've had in years. How sad is that? Maybe Pamela would've seen something to like in me or Penelope or Heather if she'd bothered spending time with us?

"This is fucking ridiculous," Pam sneers, looking away from me toward one of the guards, like she might ask to be taken back to her cell. My turn to slam both palms on the surface of the table. My turn to get a look from one of the guards.

I keep my eyes on my mother.

"Do you think I'm fucking kidding you?" I whisper, leaning in. Our eyes meet. "You know that we killed Neil, don't you? You know that we buried that monster alive in a satin-lined coffin which was a far nicer end to his life than he deserved."

Pamela's eyes blaze with fury—especially because this isn't news to her. She knows all about Neil's death, his burial, the fact that the oxygen tank found in the coffin with him came from one of the nursing homes she

moonlights at.

My mother leans forward, looking me dead in the face.

“Of all my children, you were always the worst. There were moments, early on, with Penelope where I thought I could be happy. But you? You were the worst mistake I’ve ever made.” Pam leans back after delivering what she thinks is a fatal blow crafted of words and pain. It hits me and slides right off like nothing.

“This is your absolute last chance to answer my questions,” I continue, proud of myself for keeping my breathing even and steady. “You know what happened to Neil. If you think being inside these walls keeps you safe, then you’re even more of a fool than I pegged you for years ago. *Why did you want to get away from your parents?*”

“I’m not giving you my autobiography,” Pam snaps back, and I go to stand up.

If that’s her final answer then ... well, I’ll use my new connections with Vera and Stacey’s girls to get what I need. I’ll have her fucking killed, and I’ll slash her name from my list with a lipstick color that reminds me of Penelope, and then I’ll probably cry for a while.

Throughout it all, I’ll have the Havoc Boys to fall into.

Even now, they’re waiting for me outside, piled on the roof or the hood of the Camaro, smoking, watching, waiting. Five boys in black with crude letters crafted of ink on their left hands, their hearts dark and obsessive, but poignant in their determination, in their love. Unfailing.

“Your grandfather was a drunk. He beat me and your grandmother. He used to fuck her, too, while she screamed. Does that answer your question?” Pam snaps as I lower myself back to the seat across from her. Those familiar green eyes of hers blaze with pain, but I can only sympathize so much. She is no longer just a victim; she is a perpetrator. There is no excuse for that. None at all. “I married your father because he was wealthy, and he wanted me. He wanted me so much that he divorced his wife of ten years.”

I stare at her and try to imagine her at my age, with one kid and another on the way.

“He was too old for you,” I say instead, but Pam just shrugs.

“He had money. He could take care of me.” She looks away for a moment, and I wonder if I don’t see some spark of emotion there. When she glances back however, there’s nothing. “The only man I ever loved was Neil, and you

took him from me.”

“You let him rape your daughter,” I hiss back, but Pamela’s face shows me nothing. It occurs to me that sometimes people are just broken; struggling and clawing my way toward empathy does nothing, accomplishes nothing. “How long did you know about it?” I ask, and I can see in the casual shrug of her shoulders, it was a long time. “Did you know he was fucking a teenage girl named Kali Rose-Kennedy? That she was pregnant with his kid?”

“You kill her, too?” Pamela shoots back at me, her nostrils flaring. “Because they’re trying to peg that on me.” Oh, shit. I didn’t know that one yet. *Where did the guys bury her?* I wonder. On Tom’s land? I suppose it doesn’t matter now. With the Grand Murder Party taking blame for most of our crimes, and Pamela taking the fall for the rest, we could really and truly walk away from this thing with ‘clean’ hands. “Neil didn’t love her. He just had desires that I couldn’t fulfill.”

“I hate you,” I tell her, and I mean that. With every single molecule of my heart, I mean that. It’s not like when I say it to Victor or Oscar and what I really mean is *I love you so much it hurts, so much that it aches and burns and bleeds from the very depths of my wicked soul*. “That’s why I saved you for last. You know that, right? Out of everyone that’s ever hurt me, your betrayal is the worst. It cuts the deepest.” I pause again, wondering if I should ask about Penelope’s things, but what’s the point? Pam either sold them or gave them away or, hell, threw them in a dumpster somewhere and sent them to the landfill. I won’t ever have anything that isn’t in that box marked *Old Homework and Assignments* in sweet, soft, looping letters. “How did you do it, Pam? How did you kill my sister?”

“Nice try baiting me into a confession; it isn’t going to happen.” She stands up and one of the guards begins to approach the table.

“Tell me the truth or I bury you,” I growl back at her, but she refuses to look at me. “Pamela!” The guard comes over and reapplies her handcuffs, guiding her away from me as I stand there, shaking and panting and probably crying again. “Mom!”

With a snarl, I hit the table with the heel of my hand so hard that I actually cry out, cradling it against my chest as I shove up to my feet and storm over to the exit.

Sara Young is waiting just past the metal detectors, leaning against a wall and smiling sympathetically back at me.

“Did you get anything out of that?” she asks me, but I’m sure she can already tell, based on the wetness glistening on my cheeks, or the way I’m cradling my hand against a chest full of broken, ugly things.

“You mean did I get the closure I was so desperately seeking?” I choke out with a harsh laugh. It isn’t fair. I’m *supposed* to get some sort of closure. That’s what the list is about. That’s how books work. Movies. Comics. The hero confronts the villain and gets all the answers. But ... real life makes no narrative sense. “No.”

I start to head for the door, but Sara reaches out, capturing my upper arm.

“What did you come here for, Bernadette?” she asks, and even though I know I should just yank my arm away and storm out of the building, her brown gaze is clement and indulgent. In her own way, Sara cares about me.

I stare down at her hand on my arm and she very carefully pulls it away, still watching me, dressed in a black cap, jeans, and a Polo shirt. Now that she isn’t playing the doe-eyed police girl, her outfits have changed. I was getting played much harder than I thought by sweet little Sara Young.

“I wanted to know if she really did it,” I say, my voice a hollow echo of its usual self. My eyes narrow and the corners of my lips turn down in an exaggerated frown. “I think that by avoiding coming here, I thought I could avoid the reality of it. But I just ... can’t anymore.” I look back up at Sara’s face, dark with a melancholic sort of sympathy. “Pamela murdered Penelope for the crime of ... what? Being a victim? Being abused and ignored and cast aside. I don’t understand it.”

“People like you and me will never understand people like Pamela Pence.” Sara stands up straight and turns to face me, like we need to be on level ground in order for this conversation to happen. “Someone who fights against their own self-interest, who believes in something that’s corrupt and broken. Bernadette, I know you said your mother seemed upset over that video with Neil and Penelope, but ... I don’t think it was for the reasons you wanted it to be.”

Yeah, how ironic is it that Pamela fucked up so badly that even a lie intended to get her charged with murder turned out to be impossible to keep. Like, she couldn’t even maintain the façade that she might’ve been a decent person.

“How did she do it?” I ask, my voice breaking. “How did you know?”

Sara’s mouth purses into a thin line, but she doesn’t shy away from the

question. All around us, people move in groups, talking and smoking, the mood somber and subdued. It's hard to get excited, in a cage for people. Some of the ones who are in it deserve much, much worse than this but most are just drug addicts who need rehab, not cells. It's just so goddamn fucking sad.

"Your sister kept a wireless security camera in her room, Bernadette. It was in the box of items we seized from you."

A ... security camera? I have to blink several times to clear my head.

I know cameras are cheap; you can easily get one for like eighty bucks online. And that amount of money ... it'd be easy to say, sell one of Pam's stolen designer dresses and get a camera instead. Bet ya Pamela didn't even notice it, that when she packed up Pen's room, she just shoved the camera in the box without considering that it might've been recording. I'd ask Sara, but ... Police Girl is too straitlaced to give anything else away.

"I should go." I start toward the exit and she follows me out. As I pass the maroon colored Subaru, I make sure to wave to Constantine. And then flip him off. The boys watch me from across the lot, frozen into postures of indifference—slouches, lounges, leans. They're all boneless kings, made of shadows and dark things.

And they're all waiting on *me*.

I pause in front of the Camaro, the Eldorado, and Vic's bike, all lined up in a neat row in the center of the massive parking lot. It's like, big enough for a fucking Black Friday sale or some shit. "I don't feel very good," I explain as all five of them continue to watch me, waiting to see what it is that I'll do. Gauging my mood, that's what they're doing right now.

"What do you need?" Aaron asks, the first one to slide off the hood of the Camaro and move over to stand in front of me. He offers me his cigarette, and I take it, inhaling and doing my very best not to cry. Well, not to cry *anymore*. I was crying in there even though I didn't want to, even though Pamela didn't deserve to see how much she affected me with what she did.

She took Penelope away from me, and it's the worst thing that's ever happened in my life, that probably will ever happen in my life. If Penelope were here, and I had Heather and Kara and Ashley, if I had Havoc ... life would be perfect. But it can only ever be beautifully flawed because my sister—a soul mate of a different sort than the boys—is gone and she's never coming back. She won't get to see how much I've changed, how much I've

grown, all the wonderful and crazy things that I'm going to do with my life.

"Let's go home," I say, because as much as I dislike Oak Valley, as trapped as I feel there sometimes, anywhere that has the Havoc Boys is home to me. The guys exchange looks with one another, but they don't argue, not even when I climb onto the back of Vic's bike instead of into the driver's seat of the Eldorado.

Somebody else will drive it home for me: Aaron, most likely. But back here, on Victor's Harley, this is where I feel the safest, where I've always felt the safest. I can hold him, touch him, feel the breeze in my hair ... but also, nobody can see me cry.

Once we get back to campus and ride the elevator to the eleventh floor, I can feel my body starting to sag with exhaustion. Mostly, it's with the heavy mantle of reality wrapped around my shoulders. Pamela did it. There's no denying that. Sara Young confirmed it. Pamela might as well have. Her lack of denial was more than enough to convince me.

"Bernie," Cal starts as I take off into the apartment, heading down the hall to our bedroom. *Our* bedroom. That thought should fill me with joy. Instead, I'm so twisted up in rage and hate and melancholy that I can't even appreciate it.

As tired as I am, I feel like I have to keep moving, like if I don't, the reality of what I've been avoiding since the day after the school shooting will come crashing into me like a tsunami. With ice-cold fingers, it'll drag every last part of me that's still good and hopeful out into the sea to drown.

"Where are my gym clothes?" I snap as Callum leans in the doorjamb, watching me as the other boys stay where they are in the living room. Somehow, they're really good at taking turns with their one-on-one time. It's like, being together as long as they have, they can read each other without having to ask, without having to hash things out with words.

"For what it's worth, this particular incident wasn't just Victor's fault. Some boys just don't know how to share their toys." Oscar said that to me once. The other four boys made Aaron give me up as his price for joining Havoc because, in part, they were afraid that they couldn't handle seeing us together all the time. When Aaron and I were a separate entity from Havoc, two pure untouched beautiful things, it was okay. But not in the context of the group.

But that was only because they hadn't realized how it always needed to be

between us: there is no pairing off. Not for anything more than a brief period of time. We're as interconnected as the strands in a spider's web.

"Bernie." This time, Cal's voice is much firmer, much more commanding. I pause briefly with my fingers curled around the handle of a dresser drawer so that I can look up at him. "Maybe you should take a moment and tell me what happened?"

"I just ..." The words won't come out. They're trapped. I'm frustrated. I wish I'd killed Pamela when I had the chance. But noooo, I had to get all savior-y and fuck things up with my Goody Two-shoes bullshit. I was looking for redemption in someone who had no such thing to give. "I want to go for a run."

"A run?" Cal asks, tilting his head slightly to one side. He knows as well as I do that Bernadette Blackbird does not go for 'runs'. First of all, running around for fun is a privilege not afforded to people who live in Prescott. It's very likely that a girl will end up stalked or raped or at least beaten on their way around the block. I hate that. I hate rape culture. And I hate rapists. And I hate Pamela. And I hate Neil.

"Yeah," I say dryly, standing up and popping a hip out. I'm looking for a fight, but I don't want one with my boys. I really, really don't. Closing my eyes, I take in a deep breath and try to steel myself. "Can you please help me find my gym clothes, so that I can go out and run this shit off?"

My eyes open as Cal pushes up off the doorjamb and comes over to stand beside me. He seems to know exactly what he's looking for, opening the top drawer and handing me a pair of sweats and a tank top. He doesn't even bother pretending that he isn't looking as I strip down, wrangling my tits into a sports bra that might as well be a fucking tourniquet, and slipping into a pair of sneakers.

He goes with me when I head for the front door. Not surprising. I couldn't run alone here either, not with the GMP still looming over our heads. Thus far, our planning has reached a bit of a dead end. Getting rid of either Maxwell or Ophelia is a problem; getting rid of both feels like an impossibility. If we take care of one of them, that'll tip the other off. We have to get them both at the same time, and we have to do it while they're under the watchful eye of the VGTF.

Talk about a rock, an erection, and a hard place. We are most definitely trapped.

“If we’re not back in thirty ...” Cal says as I slip out the front door and he follows me to the elevator. As soon as we step outside the lobby of the building, I start running, my feet pounding the pavement so hard that I have to grit my teeth to keep from clacking them together. I’m digging my toes and heels into the ground like it owes me motherfucking money.

Callum says nothing. Instead, he keeps pace with me so easily that it’s embarrassing. By the time I’m stumbling, soaked in sweat, and putting my hand against the wall of one of the old buildings for support, he has just the barest glimmer of sweat on his forehead and none at all on the armpits of his sleeveless white hoodie.

“Are you ready to talk now?” he asks me, in that infuriatingly calm voice of his.

“Fucking stalker,” I grumble, thinking about all those nights that I lay in bed and trembled in fear over Neil, how all that time, Cal was right there. He would’ve saved me, would’ve killed Neil if he had to, even if it meant spending the rest of his life in prison. Before I even know what I’m doing, my arms are around him and I’m sobbing into his chest like somebody who isn’t hard-as-nails Bernadette Blackbird.

“I feel pathetic,” I moan as Cal strokes my hair with his pretty fingers, his big body curled around mine, trapping me against his cotton-y sweet scent. The faintest undertone of fresh sweat colors that smell, adding a certain sense of danger to it. My body immediately reacts in the most inappropriate way possible, nipples hardening to sharp points, cunt flooding with liquid. “Why am I crying *again*, when I’ve known about this for a whole goddamn month?”

“You’re crying because you have to finally accept that somebody you love has done something unforgivable,” Callum tells me with brutal honesty. I pull away just enough to look up at him, wondering if he’s talking about his grandmother again.

“I do not love Pam,” I tell him, because that’s true. I don’t. But maybe I did, once upon a time.

“You did,” he says, echoing my thoughts, as if those gorgeous azure eyes can read every single emotion that flits through me. “But unlike my grandmother, you don’t have enough good memories to balance out the bad. You’ve just realized that Pamela Pence is as dead and gone as Penelope.”

I look down at my sneakered feet, pressed up close to Cal’s booted ones.

Pamela has to die for what she did. Fuck, I really and truly wish I'd buried her alive. Since it's too late for that, I guess I'll be seeking help from one of Stacey's girls. Death by sheets is now a very real possibility.

"She didn't give me any answers, Cal. None. Like, she couldn't even be fucked explaining to me about my dad, or her relationship with her parents, or even how she ... how ..." I don't want to finish that sentence, put to words my question about how, exactly, Pamela convinced Pen to take those pills or what Sara Young saw on that security camera that caused her to make an arrest. "And I wanted answers. I wanted all my troubles wrapped up in a bow. But that's never going to happen. I have to just ... exist with the not knowing and the wondering, and I fucking hate that."

Callum cups my face between his hands and leans down to look at me, his mouth so close to mine that I swear I can taste his breath, and it's the most delicious thing in the world. He tastes like pure, unfiltered obsession mixed with true love and doused in honesty.

"Sometimes, we don't get everything that we want. Sometimes, there are unknowns and we just have to learn to live with them. Life is messy and weird and fucked-up, but even amongst all those thorns, there are roses."

"Fuck, I want to kiss you so bad right now," I murmur, covering his hands with mine and pressing them into my face. Callum smiles, but he doesn't oblige me, not just yet.

"All I know about my grandmother is what I've pieced together from other people, and from those brief few moments a day where she forgets to be careful, where she forgets that she killed her own daughter because she so desperately wanted a son." He traces my lower lip with his thumb, and I stand there mesmerized. Mesmerized and aching and needy. "She killed her own daughter because once, she'd had that same daughter help dispose of her husband's body. And then, later, when that same daughter threatened to testify against her, she killed her, too, and stole her son and raised that son as her own." Cal pauses, and I realize that as much as I needed to talk about my past and my fucked-up family, so did he. "So, I understand how you feel. Because I'll never have all the answers. My grandmother is ... she's too far gone in her illness to give them to me. Even if she did, I doubt she'd ever give me the full truth. So I just tuck it away, behind more important things, and then it doesn't seem to matter so much anymore."

"More important things like what?" I whisper, and Cal licks his lower lip.

“Like my love for you,” he breathes, and then he’s kissing me with the full power of that fairy-tale mouth. I swear, for the entirety of that kiss, I forget that he’s actually the villain in the story. For the entirety of that kiss, I’m convinced that I’m the princess he’s just rescued from the tower, the one that he’s going to spirit away into an eternity of bliss.

And then reality comes crashing down around me, and I remember that we’re filthy and wicked, wanton and ribald and lascivious, and I can do whatever the fuck I want to this man because he’s mine. He always has been. He always will be.

My hands drop to the fly of his jean shorts as his tongue takes over my mouth, casting a spell on me that I’m not entirely certain isn’t also a curse. Callum backs me up until I’m pressed into the side of a stone wall, our bodies partially hidden by a trellis covered in ivy. It’s possible that another student might stumble on us here, twisted and tangled together like briars on the edge of an ivory tower, but I don’t care.

I just need to touch and kiss and hold someone that cares about me, somebody that I care about in return. Because I don’t need Pamela or the love that I was supposed to have from her. I went out and found my own love. And that isn’t to say that romantic love is the ultimate, it just so happens that the ultimate love I’ve found with the Havoc Boys just happens to be that. Romance. Sex. We get to have it all. *I could die happy right now*, I think, even as I’m still trembling and shaking from the depth of my mother’s betrayal.

She killed my sister.

My mother, the woman that gave birth to us, who raised us, who abused us. She snuffed my beautiful, beautiful sister out.

My right hand curves around the base of Cal’s cock, squeezing him so hard that he grunts, encouraging him to thrust against my sweaty fist. He does the same for me, finding my swollen cunt inside my sweatpants and expertly sliding a single finger in to test my readiness. What he finds there has him groaning and grinding against me, seeking hot friction between our bodies as our breath escapes in small puffs. The air is tilting toward spring, but winter has yet to give up her hold on the valley so even though we’ve been running for a while now, all the places on my body that are exposed prickle with the cold.

I like that though, the feeling of being punished by nature.

“Cal,” I murmur, sucking his bottom lip into my mouth until his eyelids flutter and he lets out a small, ragged sounding groan. “Turn me around and fuck me until it hurts.”

“Bernie,” he says, the sound caught halfway between a chastisement and an endearment. I give his cock a few last tugs before I withdraw my hand and he does the same. Just as I asked, Cal puts his hands on my hips and spins me until I’m facing the cream-colored stone wall. My palms brace against it, my back arched and my ass tilted up for his viewing pleasure. Callum curses under his breath as he drags my sweats over the plump curve of my ass, and even if I can’t see him, I can feel him admiring it.

He swipes a hot thumb over my opening—the rear one—and continues down until he finds the slickness of my cunt, pressing inside briefly. A shudder ripples through him that I can feel through even that simple touch.

“Fuck my ass,” I murmur, and Cal makes another sound that could be a growl or a cry or a little bit of both. I’m inviting his darkness to play, and he isn’t entirely sure he wants to let it out. Risking a glance over my shoulder, I find him watching me, as if he anticipated having my eyes meet his. “Do it, please.”

“We don’t have any lube,” Cal hazards, which is a good point. I’m educated enough to know that you really should have some good lube on hand if you’re going to fuck somebody’s ass. But that’s not what I want right now, something that carefully planned and easy and well-thought-out.

“I don’t care,” I tell him, licking my lips, feeling my heart pump like crazy. My sweats are bunched at my knees, my ass thrust out and in view of anyone that might take this small side path between two buildings. Doesn’t matter. Havoc rules this campus the same way we did Prescott High. These kids might have money, but they all know about Donald Asher. Some of them probably even know about Mason Miller. The thing is, you can live in a gilded cage. You can even surround yourself with guards and dogs and security systems. But that little, tiny spider, the one with venom so wicked it can stop your heart with a single bite, you can’t keep it from crawling in the cracks. “I want it to hurt, Cal. I want to feel alive and present in this moment, and I want to forget all about Pam and Neil and Sara and the GMP ...”

Callum shudders again. He might be a monster, a beast, but he’s my dog of war, and he’s so very clearly leashed that he’s helpless to respond to my unbridled avarice. With another curse, Cal spits into his hand, slicking his

cock with saliva and the clear pre-cum dripping from his tip.

I turn my head back toward the stone and then let it drop between my shoulders, closing my eyes so that I can focus on the feeling of Cal's left hand on my hip, his thumb sliding over my opening again. He very gently pushes it inside, and I hiss at the mix of discomfort and pleasure. Once he works it in just a little further, the discomfort part of the scenario fades away and then it's my turn to quiver and tremble under his touch.

"Fuck, this is tight," Cal murmurs, and I wonder if he's ever done this before, ever touched someone's ass the way he's caressing mine. The thought makes jealousy spike hot and angry through me, so I push it aside and ignore it. "I'm not sure if I'll be able to fit in here."

A dark sound rolls past my prettily painted lips, and I swipe my tongue across the lower curve in anticipation as Callum switches his thumb out for two fingers. My toes curl inside my sneakers as he slides them in and out, nice and careful, slow, patient.

I want more.

"Do it, Cal. Fuck me."

There's no mistaking my words for anything other than what they are: a command.

He obeys like the good monster he is, withdrawing his hand and replacing it with his cock. I can feel the scorching heat of his tip as he presses his erection against my ass.

Oh, God, yes please.

Callum pushes himself inside of me with a grunt from both of us, and my eyes roll into the back of my head, lids fluttering at the sensation of being so full that I can't breathe. Like I have to stop taking anymore breaths or there won't be enough room inside of me for both his dick and the oxygen that I need to live. The thing is, both Callum and air both are requirements for my survival, so I hold my breath until my chest aches and he's bottomed out completely.

Heat and pleasure spiral through me, collecting in my lower belly as my stomach muscles clench in anticipation of his movements. The only negative to this is that my pussy feels naked, empty, and I wish one of the other guys was here to help us out.

As if he can sense my needs—shit, he probably can—Cal curls his body forward, resting one of his own hands on the wall for balance as the other

sneaks between my thighs, two fingers dipping into the molten slickness of my core while the heel of his hand grinds against the hardened nub of my clit.

My knees buckle right away, but Cal keeps me standing with the pressure of his hand on my cunt, holding me there while I tremble and gasp and try to blink through the sudden bursts of white fireworks in my vision.

It feels too fucking good, almost impossibly good, and I know I'm going to come from a single thrust or two. Maybe sooner. Cal adjusts his hips, the tight band of my ass squeezing the base of him so hard that he can barely move. Just that slight shift of his body throws me fully into my climax and a deep, primal groan breaks from my own throat as I sag under him, held up by his fingers inside of me and the rough press of my palms on the stone wall.

The orgasm is lightning fast, a brief overall flicker that makes my pussy clench and ripple around Cal's fingers as he moans along with me.

"I can feel my own hand," he whispers as I pant and shake and wonder how the hell I'm going to make it back to our apartment without collapsing into one of the fancy flower beds along the way. "I can pleasure my own dick with my fingers." He hooks his fingers inside of me as if to prove a point, and I bite my lower lip so hard that I taste copper.

This is what I needed right here, a moment of grounding, of pleasure mixed with pain, of my dark avenger with his hoodies and his shorts, his tattoos and his scars, his rough voice and his too pretty mouth. He begins to move, and I'm struck yet again by how obvious it is that he's a dancer. He fights like a dancer, kills like a dancer, fucks like a dancer.

Lifting onto my toes gives us both a slightly better angle as I tremble beneath him with my sweats bunched around my knees, and my pussy dripping around his fingers. He rocks his hips against me, rather than thrusting like he might in my cunt. It's just perfect the way he does that, grinding pleasure into a part of me that's rarely touched but is now suddenly desperate for more, more, more.

"I love you, Bernie," Cal says, surprising me. He nips my ear, and I nearly collapse, my body so boneless and full of emotion and pleasure both that I'm basically sitting on his hand. "Maybe I don't say it enough, but it's true. It's the only truth I adhere to. It guides me in all things."

He starts to move the fingers of his left hand faster, the heel of his hand making my clit harden and thicken with the need to come. His hips continue to rock against me, but he isn't moving them much, mostly he's bringing us

both toward a climax with his fingers. Teasing his own dick. Teasing my pussy. Making me see stars.

My second climax hits much harder, digs its nails much deeper, and I end up dragging my fingers along the stone wall until they bleed, a long, low groan slipping past my lips as my body contracts and throbs around Callum's fingers. The feel of that, plus me rubbing my ass back against him drags out his own orgasm, and he sags against me, body shuddering. Callum spills himself inside of me and then tucks me close against him, panting hard.

For god only knows how long, we just stay where we are, frozen, gasping, the evening air prickling at our bare skin.

The sound of footsteps gets us both moving quickly, but I can't stop the groan that slips from my throat as Callum very slowly slides out of me. Fortunately, the person that's emerging around the corner isn't a member of the GMP about to catch us with our literal pants down—it's Oscar motherfucking Montauk.

"That was brilliant, really," he drawls in that board, aristocratic tone of his.

"And you were watching, why?" I retort, yanking my sweats up but stumbling just enough that Cal has to catch me by the arm. My skin burns where he's touching me, and I can't help but shift my attention up to his face. His cheeks are slightly red, either from the cold or the exertion of a good fuck, I'm not sure but the effect on his pale skin is nothing short of glorious.

"It's been longer than thirty minutes," Oscar retorts back, and I remember the words Cal called out before we left through the door of the apartment. Oops. I straighten my tank top out as Callum takes my hand and we follow after Oscar after he turns on his heel to lead us away.

"Did you enjoy the show?" I ask, because I just can't seem to help myself. Cal lets out a chuckle, meeting Oscar's eyes when he glances back at us.

"Well, O, did you?" Callum challenges, but Oscar just gives us a tight-lipped smile and keeps walking. Cal and I exchange a look and catch up to him, breaking apart from each other with great remorse. But now that we're flanking Oscar, it's much easier to see the frantic beat of his pulse in the side of his tattooed neck.

When I glance down, I can see the firm approval of his enjoyment in the hard bulge at the front of his slacks. He notices me looking and reaches over to tap my chin, drawing my gaze back up to his beautiful face.

"Enough of that, Bernadette Blackbird," he chastises, pausing outside the

door of the staff apartment building to swipe our keycard. The staff always glare at us like blights on the perfection of their indefectible school; it's even worse in here, since we're invading their living space, too.

Nobody here understands how we got in, how we get to live in an apartment together, how we get away with all the shit we do. But that's okay. It's none of their fucking business, now is it?

A brunette woman with sharp frown lines cut into the lower half of her face sniffs derisively as we pass by, and I mime giving a blowjob, pointing at the two boys with me and then hooking a thumbs-up.

"Should be a fantastic night!" I call out, giving her a little wave before I bounce into the elevator and watch Oscar press the button for our floor. He still won't look at me, so I get in his face instead, peering close at him until he finally turns his attention over to me. "Just admit it: you were watching us and getting off on it."

"O has a problem with intimacy," Cal says matter-of-factly, earning himself a glare made of gravestones and dead things.

"My father threw me into a shallow hole with my dead mother's arms wrapped around my neck; I'm allowed to have issues, Callum Park."

A ripple of violence and despair washes through me as I think about baby Oscar, with his blond hair dyed, lying in the dirt with bruises on his neck. Let's just say, his father made a good choice by putting a gun to his own head and pulling the trigger. If he were still alive, well, I'd be plotting to kill him the way I'm plotting to kill Hael's dad.

You know, when we're not being followed by cops—even ones that are now just there for our protection.

Sara Young *could* be playing a game with me. I don't think so, but I did underestimate the bitch before and I'm not going to do it again. We have to be exceedingly careful with every move we make. One wrong step could tip us from the precipice of freedom to the depths of a jail cell.

The elevator doors open, and we make our way to the apartment, knocking in a special pattern and then waiting for one of the others to verify that it's us through the peephole. The sound of locks being removed is a familiar tune for someone from south Prescott. *Click, slide, twist.* Aaron eventually opens the door, welcoming us back in.

Victor and Hael are waiting in the living room, not even bothering to hide the fact that they're staring at me.

“Look, I’m ...” Well, saying I’m fine would be a lie. I’m not fine. Nothing about this is fine. My mother killed my fucking sister. She *killed* her for the crime of, what? Standing up for herself? Trying to fight off a sick, twisted sexual predator? And now that I’ve spoken to Pamela, I realize that she’s so keen on hurting me that she’ll even take the secrets of her hatred to the grave. She won’t tell me about my dad. She won’t even say how she committed her greatest sin.

And I just have to learn to live with that.

“Processing?” Aaron suggests, and I nod, glancing briefly over at him. That’s a good word, processing. I like it.

“Processing,” I agree, feeling the sexual euphoria from outside dulling at the edges. It’s helpful, all those endorphins and shit, but it isn’t enough to erase the pain in my heart. Nothing ever will. I’m just going to have to let time work her magic, dulling my emotional wound at the edges until it’s nothing but a shiny, white scar that I can rub my fingers across. “But I’ll be okay. Don’t sit around and worry. Go get some of that fancy cafeteria food you like so much.”

“It ain’t bad,” Hael agrees, pausing when Vic gives him a look. Obviously, even with my suggestion, they’re not going anywhere. They’d rather chain themselves to my ankles. The thought makes me smile.

“Or order some pizzas,” I call out, trying for normalcy and seeing that it’s resting at the edges of my fingertips. All I have to do is lean forward and grab at it. “We can smoke and watch *South Park* when it gets here.”

“Roger that,” Hael calls out with a cheerful grin. Aaron watches me walk down the hall, but he leaves me alone as I slip into the bathroom to shower, cleaning Cal’s cum from my ass. I don’t cry again, but I’m not sure if that’s a good sign or a bad one.

Once I’m done, and my hair hangs in wet stringy tendrils around my face, I make my way into the bedroom with my towel wrapped around me to find Cal and Oscar lounging on the bed like they’re waiting for me.

I ignore them as I dig through the dresser for pj’s, but like, it’s nearly impossible to resist the dual power of their stares. Eventually, I turn around, a flimsy silk nightie in my hand that I just know I shouldn’t wear but probably will anyway. If I put this on, I’ll be ravaged in it, no doubt.

“We thought you might enjoy having something to take your mind off of Pamela,” Oscar suggests in a voice so mild that it couldn’t be anything *but*

terrifying. Carefully, slowly, I turn around to look at him, dressed in a pair of gray sweats and nothing else. Ink crawls over his body like a plague, tainting every square inch of flesh. The metal swords pierced through his nipples catch the faint light from the single bedside lamp as he sits up. “You asked me to teach you a bit of my knot mastery, correct?”

I just stare at him, but even though I *want* to be miserable and wallow in my hate and frustration, my interest is piqued.

“You want to teach me right now?” I query, glancing over at Cal and trying to figure out if he’s in here by accident or design. Those blue eyes of his blaze bright, and he tosses me a cocky smile.

“You can practice on me,” he confirms, nodding his head and then pulling his hoodie off. His shirt gets caught along with it, but Cal doesn’t seem to mind, tossing both items onto the floor. His pink nipples are rock-solid, and even though he just came in me not a half hour ago, he’s ready again. I can see the proof of that as he strips off his shorts, leaving himself entirely naked.

Cal crooks a smile at me, but Oscar snaps his fingers and I give him a skeptical look.

“Let me teach you the *lark’s head knot*,” Oscar drawls, giving me a look right back. “Could come in useful in a survival situation, too.”

“Oh, I see,” I start with a roll of my eyes as I climb onto the bed, still wearing my towel. “You’re only teaching me this because of a possible survival situation?”

Oscar’s mouth quirks at the edge as he takes a length of silky bloodred rope in his hands.

“No, I’m also telling you in case we need to tie up these other boys to get some fucking peace.” Oscar snaps that last word out between his teeth, making it sharp, almost painful to listen to. Now that I see him like this, gray eyes blazing, I can remember the feel of his hands around my throat. And fuck it felt good. And fuck if I don’t agree with his decision to remain a virgin until me.

He really, truly, possibly could’ve hurt someone. But he’ll never hurt me. That much I know for a fucking fact.

“Now, watch me,” Oscar begins, his voice changing from that of a thespian psychopath to a stern teacher. His glasses slip down his nose and he pushes them back up with a single finger before eyeing me over the rims. I do my absolute best not to smile. “There are a few basic knots in *shibari*. Let’s start

with the lark's head knot. It isn't used for bondage directly, but it's usually the first step in other ties." He makes a loop with the rope, folds it in half, and then slips two fingers into each of the smaller loops that movement creates. I blink a few times, but he does it again, easily. And then again.

Oscar hands the rope over to me.

"Try it," he commands, so I do. It isn't as hard as I first thought. After a few tries, I get it. While I'm in the process of doing that, Callum is stroking himself with long, easy movements of his fist. The way his blue eyes go hooded, the way his pink lips part, it's almost too much.

I shift a bit as I hand the rope back, and the towel falls off, plopping to the floor as Oscar goes very, very still.

"Shit," he grinds out, but he doesn't stop moving the rope around. I realize after a moment that I'm supposed to still be watching his hands, not his silver eyes, not his dangerously beautiful lips. I drop my gaze down. "The overhand knot." He finishes his demonstration, the soft whisper of the rope as he ties it making my heart thunder. "And the double overhand."

I watch his inked fingers moving, but I promise at this point, I'm not paying much attention to the lesson. I just like the way he moves. He shows me the square knot and the surgeon's knot, and then moves onto half-hitches.

"Now," he commands finally, gesturing over at Callum. "Help me tie him up." Oscar turns his cool gaze over to Cal, but he can't hide the bead of sweat that trails down his inked throat, between his biceps, and down to the belly button darkening his perfect abs. "Put your back against the headboard, Cal."

Callum complies, allowing us to tie him without complaint, hooking his ankles and his neck and wrists to the slatted headboard. The obscene color of the red rope against his pale skin, against his scars and tattoos and long, lean dancer's body, that makes me so wet and swollen that when I shift backwards on the bed a bit, my thighs rub and pleasure radiates through me in a wave.

"Holy fuck," I murmur, studying Cal's bound form, his cock thick and swollen and throbbing with need. He can't do shit about it either. He's at our mercy. Wouldn't surprise me if he used the safe word right now.

Callum just closes his eyes and shudders for a moment before lifting his lids again and staring at us. I turn back to Oscar and he shoves his pajama pants over his hips, slicking a thumb over the moist head of his cock. He drags his fingertips down, playing with one of his piercings. It's incredible to me that someone who hates to be touched so much has so much ink, such

intimate piercings. He's alluded to the story behind that, about the physical pain chasing the emotional, but I need more.

Whenever he's ready to tell me, I'll be here.

"Come, Bernadette," Oscar says, and even though I'm his queen and I give the orders, I can sense that he needs moments to be in charge, too, to quell some of that violent, icy anger inside of him. I crawl over his lap, but he encourages me to prop my cunt against his thigh instead of over his shaft. He grabs me roughly by the back of my hair and licks the shell of my ear once before whispering, "*move.*"

I do as Oscar tells me, rubbing the swollen heat of my cunt on him. Right now, wrapped up in all of this, my worries are as distant as shooting stars. There isn't anything more important than being in the moment, of seeing Cal twisted in Oscar's rope, of slicking along his inked, muscular thigh until he's wet with me.

My own inked left hand grabs his cock, pleasuring him as we stare into each other's eyes and our mingled breath fogs his glasses. My clit is hitting in just the right spot, and that brilliant beyond brilliant gaze is searing into me, making my body feel liquid, weightless. My eyes go half-hooded as I tear my attention from Oscar to see Callum moaning and shifting, trapped in that beautiful, red rope.

The orgasm hits me like a punch to the gut, making me groan, making my insides flutter. As soon as it hits me and my muscles go taut, Oscar adjusts me, moving my hips and spearing me on his cock as the climax takes over my entire body. The long, low moan trailing from my lips is soon joined by his as he spills himself inside of me and then rolls me onto my back beside him.

"Please make me come," Cal murmurs, his eyes squeezed shut tight. "Please fucking god."

I sit up on one elbow, panting, staring at him with vision clouded by sex.

"Do it," Oscar commands, and I glance back to see him staring down at me like an imperious prince. "Do it, Bernadette."

I reach out with my left hand and give Cal three small, delicate strokes with loose fingers. He comes so hard, all over his stomach and chest, bound with the rope and unable to do anything but experience the rush. After, he slumps in his bondage, panting and shaking, and Oscar moves over, untying him with a few, deft strokes.

“Jesus motherfucking Christ,” Cal murmurs, shaking as he snatches the half-drunk Pepsi bottle from the nightstand. “Holy shit.”

“Holy shit is right,” I murmur back, and then I know that I’m going to need to try it again soon, Oscar tying me up. Last time, he left. This time, he isn’t allowed to. “Oscar ...”

“Do you feel better now?” he asks me, genuinely serious. All I can do is nod my head as I crawl up to lie beside him, letting him rest his hand on the side of my head. Callum crowds close behind me, throwing an arm around my waist.

I snuggle them both for a minute, my two, dark, precious monsters.

“I feel better,” I say, because I’m happy, but I’m not over it. So, I decide to tell the truth, too. “But only a little.”

“*Little by little, a little becomes a lot.*” Oscar trails off and I close my eyes. It’s not exactly a Shakespearean creation, but it works. And within just a few minutes, I’m asleep and dreaming.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY

It takes about three weeks to set my mother's fate in stone, to sit down with Vera over coffee—not cat shit coffee either—and talk about what needs to be done. Callum doesn't think I should keep chasing loose ends, but I need Pamela off my list for good. At first, I thought that by sending her to jail, that I could accomplish that feeling.

But it isn't enough.

Not after what she did to Penelope.

Frankly, it wouldn't be enough if I put an upside-down bucket with starving rats in it on her belly and watched as they slowly and agonizingly ate their way through her insides. For what she did to Pen, to me, to Heather, she deserves to burn at the stake.

So, as Vera makes the arrangements—finding the right girl for the job, paying off whatever guards need to be paid to make this happen, waiting for a moment when my bitch mother isn't in solitary for mouthing off—I wait. I sit in my fancy classes with my fancy iPad while my fancy teachers try to teach me things that I can't understand because my public school wasn't appropriately funded. Because, somehow, giving equal money to all schools regardless of where they're located and educating the children of our country is controversial to some people.

Oak Valley Prep and me, that's a wash. I struggle through it though as best as I can, even as I know that the only person in Havoc whose diploma matters

is Victor. Getting straight C's at this point is all that I want. Because graduating to me is still important, because being the first woman on Pamela's side of the family to actually accomplish that goal is important.

Sometimes, I follow Trinity around just to see her squirm. Sometimes, I make out with Victor in front of her fancy friends or murmur *brother-fucker* under my breath when I pass her in the halls. But honestly, as much as I want to hate the school and all of the people in it, it's actually ... kind of nice living here.

Sharing an apartment with the boys is amazing, being able to see my sisters (let's be fair and just start calling all of them what they really are) is incredible, and the food isn't halfway bad. Although once, they actually served fucking snails in the cafeteria and I thought I might puke the way Charli and Dixie D'Amelio did when they botched that TikTok video after finding a snail in their paella. If you don't know what I'm talking about, thank god for you. Don't bother Googling it; it isn't worth your time.

After school, when I get up to the apartment with Oscar as my escort to find the other four boys waiting for me, I know that something is wrong.

"The girls," I start, but Victor is already shaking his head and standing up, holding his big palms out to placate me.

"The girls are fine," he explains quickly, glancing over at Aaron, like he trusts him to deliver whatever news this is in the most ... tranquil and pacifying manner possible.

"What?" I ask, looking between Vic and Aaron, back to Hael, over to Cal. Oscar seems unsurprised to see the boys here, his phone in his hand, fingers clenched tight. Whatever this is, he's known about it. For how long, I'm not sure, maybe just long enough to walk me up here, but he waited to tell me until now so it must be bad. "Jesus, you guys, what the fuck is it?"

"Your mother," Aaron begins, and I quirk a brow. There's not really much else that bitch could do that would surprise me. There is literally *nothing* she could do that would hurt me worse than what she did to Penelope. "Bernadette, she killed herself."

I just stand there, staring at Aaron like he's lost the fucking plot.

Killed herself? No, she didn't kill herself. Stacey and Vera's girl, she was going to do it. We've been working on this for weeks. Pamela is the last name on my list, and it's my right to decide what happens to her and when. She doesn't get to just kill herself.

“What?” I ask, setting my book bag on the counter and trying to blink my way through this. “I don’t understand. We were going to have her ... dealt with. We were ...”

“She took her own life,” Victor repeats, crossing his arms over his massive chest and exhaling. His gaze is not unsympathetic. “We thought at first that maybe the GMP had gotten to her, but she was in solitary again this week, so ...” He trails off, waiting for me to have some sort of reaction. “We figured it might’ve been one of the guards, but we managed to grease some palms and talk to someone who saw the security footage.”

“How.” It’s not even a question. It’s a goddamn statement. I’m so fucking pissed off right now that I’m quivering. *How dare she?!* is the first thought that comes to mind. You wouldn’t think, considering I was already planning on having the bitch killed, that I would care she was dead.

Only ... I do.

I do so much that it feels suddenly hard to stand up, and I slump into one of the stools at the breakfast bar. Oscar moves up beside me, stroking long, careful fingers across the back of my neck. My gaze shifts his direction, and our eyes meet. Casual touching is hard for him, so this is kind of a big deal to me, even in the light of the Pam stuff.

“She purchased some drugs off a fellow inmate,” Victor explains as Hael moves into the kitchen and gets me something to drink. He places the brandy in front of me, and I don’t even have to ask where he got it from. He and Cal have been breaking into some of the staff apartments for fun, just to see if they can do it without getting caught. Sometimes, they take an item or two, nothing noticeable, but just because they can.

This is where the brandy comes from.

And you know how much I love the taste of stolen things.

I down the whole of it in one go and then slam the glass back down so that Hael can refill it.

“Bernadette,” Victor hazards as Oscar stays close on my left side, Aaron just behind me, and Cal climbs up onto the counter to crouch the way he likes to do. “What are your thoughts?”

My thoughts ... I down the second glass of alcohol and let the warm fire of it percolate up through me, cutting through the storm of feelings that are swirling around inside my chest.

Pamela is dead.

I wanted her dead, but ... my mother is dead. And I was supposed to kill her. And now she's taken away the last bit of power I held over her, the only shred of vengeance. A small noise escapes me, and my palm itches, right on that thin, white scar where Victor cut me and we shared blood.

Havoc.

Blood in, blood out.

I look around at the five of them, hands clenching and unclenching at my sides.

"I want to go out," I say, but I don't tell them where or why. I'm not entirely certain that even I know the answers to those questions just yet. "Call the fucking valet."

Sara's protective detail follows us to the store to grab supplies where the boys look at me like I'm nuts for purchasing several dozen white candles. In addition to that, I grab some blankets, a new tube of pink lipstick called *Finish Lines*, and a chocolate cake.

Afterwards, we drive over to this Thai food place that I'm obsessed with to pick up takeout. While I'm waiting for the order to be filled, I pretend that I need to use the bathroom, slip out the back door of the restaurant, and sneak around to the front of the liquor store that's next door.

I'm in and out in a jiffy with two bottles of stolen Fireball Cinnamon Whiskey. The tagline for this brand is *Tastes Like Heaven, Burns Like Hell*. And if that isn't the most apt slogan for my life right now then I'm not sure what is.

Sounds difficult to steal something as large as a one-point-seven-five-liter bottle, right? Let alone two of them. The thing about thievery is, most stores have little to no security. And even when they do, their security officers are usually neutered to the point where they can only *ask* for you to return said merchandise and take a seat in their office. They can't even fucking touch you. So, the answer to how it is that we manage to steal shit is twofold. One, it's far easier to steal things than anybody thinks. More often than not, you can waltz right out of a store with an entire cart worth of crap and nobody can or will stop you. Second, Havoc is exceptionally good at what we do.

"I want to go somewhere quiet, somewhere remote," I say, after I slip back

in the Eldorado where Oscar, Aaron, and Victor are waiting. For once, Vic didn't bring his Harley. I think he knew that I needed to drive, and I also think he couldn't bear to be separated from me. Not today. Not today when ... I don't let myself think about it.

Not yet.

I think, if they'd had the choice, Hael and Callum would be in here, too. But even though the Caddy can technically seat six, it wasn't meant for five beefy boys with rippling muscles and attitudes the size of Alaska. Plus, it's sort of a safety thing with us. What if one of the cars breaks down and we're in a sticky situation? It's always best to have two, at least.

"Let's go to my grandmother's house," Victor says, and I glance over at him, sitting in the front seat with Aaron between us. "It meets all of your requirements."

I think about that for a moment because, ultimately, this is my decision to make.

Today is a monumental day in so many ways.

It's *my* day.

The day my mother died.

Something strange catches inside of me as I start the car and send us screeching out of the parking lot. The Camaro follows and so do the cops, but I don't really care if they know where we're going. Even if we did outrun them again, they'll catch up to us. And if we remove the trackers, well, that'll just rouse Sara's suspicions even further.

"Should we really trespass with the cops on our asses?" I ask, and Vic gives me a small, secretive little smile. It's Oscar, however, that's the one to answer from the backseat.

"We're in escrow," he tells me, folding his arms on the front seat and watching me as I drive, fuzzy pink dice swaying in such a way that they catch his attention and cause him to scowl in feigned annoyance. He pretends like Hael's cuteness and quirks bother him, but that's a total heap of crap. He loves the guy just as much as I do. "When we inquired with Ophelia about holding the wedding there, we discovered that the property was in the process of transferring hands to the city."

"Unpaid property taxes," Vic explains as Aaron snorts. "We agreed to pay those off in exchange for the city offering us a onetime use permit." Victor leans back in the seat, crammed up against Aaron and me. "And now, yeah,

we're in escrow. The city liked our offer."

"Where are we getting the money for this?" I ask, because I imagine that fifty-grand we had in our account is nearly gone. I haven't much had the head for finances as of late. And anyway, that isn't the king and queen's job: it's the accountant's.

"Let me worry about the finances," Oscar purrs, reaching out to stroke some hair back from my face. "You have noticed we haven't been giving out weekly allowances? We've sold off the rest of the weed and the cars from the garage; money is tight, but a dilapidated house on the edge of the city doesn't cost much."

"What they're both trying to say in so many words," Aaron continues, letting his fingers trail up my thigh. "Is that you don't have to worry about anything tonight?"

I nod, but there's something strange in my throat, something breaking up the melancholy that's creeping through me like evening shadows. Happiness? Pretty sure that's what this thing is. We're buying Victor's grandmother's house? It seems surreal. Also, it seems very Havoc. It's a *very* Havoc thing to do.

Once we get to the property, the police pull off at the end of the long drive, leaving us to trundle down it and park by the sagging front steps.

I climb out, slamming the door behind me, and look up at the imposing Gothic Revival structure in front of me. It's bathed in shadows, its dark windows like the empty eyes of a wicked spirit, haunting this quiet, dusty place on the edge of nowhere. The only reason I actually know what sort of house it is, is because Oscar told us the first time we arrived. Otherwise, like I said, Prescott High and architecture ... ehh.

My mind shifts from the image of the soaring three-story house and right back toward Pamela again. Like, I hated the bitch. Like, she killed my sister. Also, she's dead.

She's dead.

My mother is dead?

And she killed my sister.

My brain fucking hurts when I try to stop and make sense of it. Maybe some things aren't meant to be parceled and pulled apart and overly examined? Can I just feel sad about it without understanding why? Can I just mourn for the sake of mourning?

“Bernie.”

The soft sound of Aaron’s voice draws me away from a nightmare and into the impenetrable darkness of the countryside. We’re not ten minutes outside of town, and you literally can’t see your hand in front of your face.

What I can see, however, is Aaron. He’s standing beside me with a candle in his hand, the dancing white glow illuminating all the beautifully masculine lines of his face. He smiles at me and hands it over, taking another one off the hood of the car and lighting that, too.

“Let’s go inside?” he suggests, and I nod, listening to the distant rustle of tree branches and the haunting call of an owl from somewhere beyond the small circle of light cast by the Camaro’s headlights. Hael leaves them on while he and the boys gather up our things, carrying them inside the house for me.

Best part of dating five strong dudes: I don’t have to do any heavy lifting. It’s a tad sexist, I know, but I figure after centuries of patriarchal domination, it’s the least they can do for me.

The steps creak as Aaron and I walk up them, using our candles for light. We *could* use our phones, but that’s boring as fuck, isn’t it? There’s nothing magical about the glowing face of a Samsung or an iPhone. Technology, in its own way, is sort of tragic. I’d much rather exist in the sorcery of candlelight.

I find that the boys have set up our blankets in the parlor, the room immediately to the left of the front door. It’s the same room where I gussied-up for my wedding. This is the same house where two pedophiles died a much kinder death than they deserved.

Already, the boys are spreading the candles around the room and lighting them, turning the place into a witch’s den where I can nestle with all my dark and dangerous thoughts. There’s a sense of ritual to it, which I so very much need right now. Even if I don’t believe in anything spiritual or religious or magical, it never hurts to carry out a ceremony of sorts, something to mark a special occasion.

And—whether good or bad—this is a very special occasion indeed.

Because it means my list is done.

That fucking list I scrawled on the back of an old envelope in Aaron’s now defunct minivan.

It’s in the pocket of my pink leather Havoc jacket, and even though it

weighs less than an ounce, it feels like a thousand pounds, like it's weighing me down and making my knees buckle.

I end up kneeling in the nest of blankets with Aaron by my side. He takes my candle and sets it aside, watching as I strip off my boots and toss them into the corner. It feels like a night to be barefoot, doesn't it?

Glancing up, I see cobwebs and dust, crumbling plaster, and a ceiling medallion that I already know I'm going to try to save. Poetry might be my artistic medium, but once an artist, always an artist. If you can find beauty in decay, then you've just learned what it means to be human. The meaning of life, in so many words.

Love. Art. Compassion. Empathy.

I'm not sure why people act like that's such a difficult question. The meaning of life is obvious. It's to fucking *live* it.

"It's so creepy in here," Aaron murmurs, pushing chestnut curls back from his forehead as my heart seizes painfully in my chest. That's a trigger for me, seeing him touch those goddamn curls. I want to fucking eat them they're so beautiful. He gives me mad schema.

"You don't sound like you think that's entirely a bad thing," I murmur as Callum crouches beside me, setting the bag of takeout in the center of what's shaping up to be a circle. Hael sits next to him, then Victor, Oscar, and right back to Aaron. A circle. A sphere. A shape with no beginning and no end.

I reach for the food and find my box of pad Thai sitting on the top.

"A little creepy now and again can be a good thing," Aaron says, giving Cal a look. For his part, Callum just chuckles and lifts a single shoulder in faux apology.

"I can't help myself," he murmurs, passing out white boxes to the other boys until he finds his own food. "It's just too much fun to scare people—particularly the ones that deserve it." He steals a plastic fork from the bag and digs in while I study the fireplace behind Victor's head, the one with the stones tumbling out of it. To fix that, we're going to need, like, a mason or something—that is, if it's at all savable.

We eat for a few moments in silence, Hael's eyes flicking up to me every now and again until he finally sets his food down in his lap and gives me a look.

"You sure this is what you want to be doing right now?" he asks as the candles flicker and jump around us, casting strange shadows on the walls.

There's always a possibility that the GMP could've followed us here, that even now, they could be working their way through the woods at the back of the house, out of sight from the two police officers, as they get ready to strike.

But I don't think so.

Ophelia wants that money. Maxwell probably does want to kill us, but he'll be careful with his plans. As careful as we're being. Because if he comes for us again and makes another mistake the way he did at the school, he'll never live it down. His men won't trust him. The feds will *definitely* try for RICO charges—that's when you get the leader of an organization tried and convicted based on the things his underlings have done.

For now, I feel like we're relatively safe.

It won't last, obviously. Nothing this nice ever does. Or at least, it requires sacrifice, and I feel like we haven't made any big ones just yet.

"This is what I want to be doing," I confirm, adjusting myself so that I'm situated in a small nest of blankets. If I seem calm, it's all bullshit. Because I'm not. I'm not calm because Pamela took away my power over her. By killing herself, she's removed my last chance at reaping justice for Penelope. Now, Pam is dead, and she's no longer suffering, and the world just keeps on turning, as if it isn't a tragic loss that the woman never really paid for her crimes.

I poke at my food for a while, glancing up only briefly to make sure that Oscar is eating. He is. He's been eating a lot more lately, so much so that he's put on a bit more muscle mass. It ripples in his arms when he dresses in a tank top for bed. It shows in the valleys of his abdominal muscles and the way his dress shirt stretches across his shoulders after he takes off his jacket and loosens his tie.

A ghost of a smile teases my lips before it falls away again.

"Get the whisky," I command, and it's Victor who grabs it, unscrewing the top and taking a huge swig before he passes it down the line. When it's my turn, I drink as much as I can stand, choking at the fiery burn in my throat but loving the way it warms up my cold belly, stealing away just a fraction of that fear and pain. I take a second swallow before handing it over to Cal.

"You're upset," Victor says, and it isn't a question. It's just a fact and a command, one that demands I spill my feelings out to him because he's a dark god whose presence won't allow me to be numb for even a single

second.

“Of course I’m upset,” I say, setting my food aside and then crawling forward on my hands and knees to fetch the whisky bottle again. I sit back with it in my lap and then take another chug, one that makes bubbles gurgle inside the bottle. “My mother killed my sister. My *mother*. The same person who birthed Penelope killed her.” I take another drink. The boys won’t let me get so drunk that I’ll have alcohol poisoning, but if I want to be plastered and stumbling, they’ll watch over me tonight. “And now I can’t even ... I feel like she’s just slipped through my fingers forever.”

My face scrunches up as Oscar’s tightens in a rare show of sympathy.

“I know how you feel,” he says, surprising me. He isn’t one to offer up his emotions freely. “For years, I felt the same way about my own father. He took his life and left me with no recourse to punish him. In a way, you’re glad that person is dead and gone, because they ruined your life in ways that can never be fixed. In the same breath, you mourn. In the next breath, you rage.”

I just stare at him for a moment before setting the whisky bottle aside and crawling through the circle yet again. This time, I’m not searching for booze. This time, I’m finding the warm comfort of Oscar Montauk’s lap.

The incredible thing about it is that I’m the only person in the known universe who’s allowed to touch him like this, cuddle him and feel his long fingers tangling in my hair. He lets out a long sigh, and even though I know he would never ask for something I don’t want to give, his cock thickens beneath my cheek and I find myself rubbing against it.

“My list is done,” I say, and Oscar’s fingers pause for a moment before he strokes one down the length of my nose, traces my lips, memorizes me with the one sense he used to be most afraid of but which is the most powerful of all: *touch*. “It’s all done.”

“It’s done,” he agrees, stroking me as I close my eyes and I listen to the other boys pass the whisky bottle around the circle. “Sometimes, when you finish something so important, it feels both good and bad. You wish you were still working on it, but you’re relieved that it’s behind you.”

I roll onto my back and open my eyes, so that I can stare up at him. He very carefully reaches his fingers up to his loosened tie and begins to undo it. We’re going to have sex in this crumbling old house tonight. He knows it; I know it; I’m sure the rest of the Havoc Boys know it.

“Don’t let the last name on my list be so ... anticlimactic,” I murmur, feeling my hands shake as I lift them to Oscar’s face. It was born in drama, right, that list? And so it has to go out with the same fashion, with a bang, with a spark that burns too bright and too hot to ignore.

“I promise,” Oscar murmurs, leaning over to kiss me, “that it will not be anticlimactic.”

His rapier of a mouth slices against mine, so sharp and so painful that I’m sure I’m bleeding, but yet, I can’t stop. I crave this pain because it matches my own, because it sings the same tunes and paints in the same colors.

Oscar’s tongue gives a hot swipe over mine before he pulls away, sitting up and undoing the buttons on his shirt as Aaron crawls over to me, moving between my legs to undo the black leather pants I’m wearing. They’re so tight that he has to peel them down the molded curves of my hips, past my pale silky thighs, and tug them from my feet.

The tattooed god above me tosses his tie aside, throws off his shirt. And then Aaron is flipping me over so that I can watch Oscar free his cock from his black slacks. With the tattooed, pierced length of him bobbing in front of my face, there’s nothing more I want to do than take him into my mouth.

His breath hisses out, almost like he’s pain, but he kneads my scalp with his fingertips in a very clear message: *do not stop*. At the same time, I feel warm hands encouraging me to put my ass in the air. When I heed that call and do as Aaron’s asked, I can feel his hot mouth taking my cunt, tongue slicking along my folds as I groan with my own lips pressed to Oscar’s cock.

He continues to knead my hair with his fingertips, encouraging me to continue what I’m doing as Aaron slips two fingers inside of me. He fucks me nice and slow with his hand while my head bobs up and down on Oscar’s dick.

Victor is the only one of the boys that I can see, and he stares down at me like he’s the ruler of this entire room, like this is a gift that only he could ever give me. I should be grateful to touch Oscar the way I do, to feel Aaron between my thighs. Because he’s the only one that could grant me the right to do that.

It feels like, with the way he’s looking at me, that if the other boys are gods then Victor is the king of the gods and we all belong to him. When Oscar flicks a slight glance in his direction, I can see it and I know: these boys belong to Vic just as much as they belong to me. The idea of that makes me

sting with jealousy, but only for a split-second. Then it thrills me, it thrills me so much that I really and truly feel like part of a ruling pair.

As the queen, it's my job to take care of these boys the way they need. So, as Victor strokes himself beside me, one hand leaning back to balance his big body as he reclines effortlessly on the floor, I continue to suck and lick and scrape with my teeth. Vic looks almost bored as he does it, stroke himself like that. Our eyes stay locked as I bring Oscar to climax inside my mouth, hot jets of cum teasing my tongue at the same moment that Aaron thrusts into me and I cry out.

I lift up onto my hands, panting and swallowing, and then Oscar takes my chin in his fingers and kisses me, cleaning my tongue and lips of his seed. Aaron holds my hips in a tight grip as he fucks me from behind, and I can't help but risk a glance over my shoulder, just so I can see chestnut hair plastered to his sweaty forehead.

Fuck.

Letting my head drop, I push my hips back against him, meeting his thrusts with my own.

"Shit, screw this," I hear Hael murmur, and then he's approaching me, sitting down on the floor and letting me make the decision of whether or not to touch his cock. I do, dropping my mouth down on the tip and giving it a harsh suck as his hips thrust in response.

Aaron pulls out before he's finished, and then I feel the hot, hot heat of his release on my back and ass. *Holy shit, this is going to make a huge mess.* But I love that. I love the idea of seeing the occasion marked in the smears of dust on the floor, the wet spatter of arousal. It turns me on as I glance back and see Cal approach me.

He kneels down and guides the head of his cock to my cunt, sliding in nice and slow as I lick and suck frantically at Hael's dick in response, flicking the piercing at the tip with my tongue as his hips rise up off of the floor.

Oscar, Aaron, and Victor are all pressed close, watching. Well, Oscar and Aaron are watching me specifically. Vic is watching all of us, his dark eyes taking in his pack of wolves, his dogs of war.

Vic waits for Hael to come in my mouth with a sharp, masculine cry, Hael's hand fisting in my hair as he drives himself as deep into my throat as he can. When he's finished, he slides back just enough that Cal and I have space to move, rocking into each other.

My body is quaking now, flushed with violent heat as Callum reaches around for my clit, slicking his thumb in circles around the hardened nub. Digging my fingernails into the floor, I move against him, drawing those velvety sounds from his throat, the ones that are both hard and soft, all at the same time. It's as if the voice Cal would've had if he hadn't been beaten so severely, and the voice he has now are intertwined, inextricably tied together.

He gives me my first orgasm of the night, a brief shuddering of muscles and a choking gasp that falls from my throat as I try and fail to stay upright, crashing forward into Hael's lap as the last shocks of pleasure overtake me. Hael holds me there while Callum finishes inside of me, my silken inner muscles pulsing and bringing him to climax the way centuries of evolution have taught men to do.

Primal. Basic. Animalistic.

We are all of those things, but we're also so much more. There is *so much fucking more* to the Havoc Boys and me. It's inexplicable. Impossible to recreate. This is one of those once in a lifetime—once in a handful of lifetimes—moments.

Cal slumps back, and I sit up, and then Vic is beckoning me like I'm being summoned to his throne room. His dark gaze sweeps the other boys, reminding them that the reason they're so confused when he says that I belong to him, is because they've forgotten that they, too, also belong to him.

His pack. His wolves. His Havoc.

Victor takes me in his arms and sweeps his big hand into my hair, crushing my mouth to his in a flurry of sparks and light and heat, like an electrical storm on a warm, summer night when lightning crashes and rain pours. It's like, Vic is the incoming elemental impact I never knew I needed. A force of nature.

He adjusts his grip to my ass, taking both cheeks in his greedy fingers, and then he moves to impale me on that massive dick of his, sinking me down until we're fully joined together. Our eyes lock, our breathing quickens. I don't even have to move because Vic is more than happy to do the work, rocking my hips with his hands, bringing his pelvis up off the floor to thrust into me.

And then, as if in the midst of a miracle, Victor invites the remaining gods in his court to join us. He lies back on the floor with me on top of him, straddling his cock and rolling my hips in search of more please. More, more,

more. It's all I can think about right now.

Sweat streaks my curvy, inked body as Aaron presses up close behind me, slipping his fingers into my mouth and encouraging me to suck and lip and nibble before he moves them to my ass. He inserts one and then the other, letting out a ragged moan against the side of my throat that has me bucking and writhing atop Vic, my nails digging into his chest.

For his part, our king holds onto my hips, gripping me tight, claiming me even as he deigns to share me. Even as he deigns to share his boys. Because, let's be honest, that's what he's doing: sharing them with me. They were his first. He wrangled them, claimed them, marked them, even before I was a part of any of it. Sure, I was the catalyst, but I wasn't truly a member of Havoc until he set that fucking crown on the top of my bloodied head.

Aaron warms my opening with those two fingers, groaning against my ear and then biting it sharply enough that I cry out and my cunt locks around Vic, making him grunt. We've been here before, the three of us, with Vic's and Aaron's positions reversed. Still, the wonder and awe in Aaron's voice catches me right in the heart, as if this is brand-new all over again. "I can feel him inside of you, Bernie," Aaron whispers, and I'm reminded of Cal remarking on the same thing, about how he could feel his cock with his fingers. "I can feel him."

"Do you hate it?" I whisper, the movements of my hips slowing momentarily, my gaze still on Victor's. He can hear what we're saying, every word of it. He waits patiently, a smirk building on his face as his purple-dark hair falls across his forehead and fans against the dusty old floorboards of a long-forgotten house. *A house that's going to be ours, that's going to belong to us.*

And not just me and Vic: all of us.

"No," Aaron breathes, and then he's pulling his fingers out of me and pressing his still-slick shaft against my opening. He places his hand's over Victor's, tangling their fingers together, holding me captive.

The first push of Aaron's cock against that tight, little opening is almost too much. My nails dig even harder into Vic's chest, drawing blood, marking him. Because he is king, but I am queen. There is only one person in the universe that this alpha male will consent to belonging to and that person is *me*.

Aaron pushes a little harder, a little deeper, and this time, it's Vic who lets

out a ragged sounding groan.

“*Fuck*,” he chokes out, reminding me of our threesome in the master bedroom. It feels like when I’ve got Vic and Aaron at the same time, like they’re two halves of the same whole and they can only exist in relation to one another. Even as much as they despise each other sometimes, they love each other in greater measures. Always. “*Fuck, that’s good.*”

With another slow, savage movement of his hips, Aaron slides the rest of the way into me. If I thought I couldn’t breathe before, with Callum inside of me, then I really can’t breathe now. I’m stretched to the maximum, completely full of Havoc and yet, somehow, desperate for more.

“Callum,” Victor commands, and he doesn’t have to say anything more than that. Somehow, Cal knows exactly what his boss wants. He ends up in front of me, his feet on either side of Vic’s head. My eyes lift up to find Cal’s sapphire ones staring down at me. His prince-turned-villain mouth tilts up at the edges as he reaches out for my hand, and I give it to him, letting him curl my fingers around the base of his cock.

He doesn’t stop there, taking a gentle handful of my hair and pulling me forward so that my mouth engulfs his tip. With a sigh of agonized relief, Cal pumps his hips, filling my mouth and sliding his velvety length against my tongue.

“Oscar.”

That next command from Vic’s menace of a mouth is no less potent for being underneath Cal’s naked body or pressed right up against Aaron’s inside of me. He doesn’t care. He isn’t ashamed.

Our resident thespian kneels on my left side, his inked body nude, his cock thick and ready again despite having come so recently. They’re insatiable, my monsters. Oscar puts my hand on his cock and encourages me to pump him by tangling his fingers with my own. He controls the pace and the speed and the firmness of my grip.

“Hael.”

This command comes last, and with the slightest breath of apology, like Victor is trying to say something with actions that he struggled to say with words. *Join us. I’m sorry that I kicked you out. You belong to me, too. We are more than just friends; we are and always will be family.*

Hael mimics Oscar’s pose on my right side, taking my hand and putting it where it needs to go, begging me to squeeze and stroke and pleasure.

Fuck. Me.

For the briefest of moments, we're just all tangled together and I'm touching and loving and feeling all my boys at once. His task completed, Victor redoubles his efforts, thrusting up and into me, making both me and Aaron cry out as he essentially fucks the both of us with his movements.

My clit swells and aches, and then Hael is reaching out and teasing it for me while I continue to stroke him, making my body shudder and quiver with the desperate need for climax. It happens quickly, and I'm left shaking and boneless, my muscles going taut as violent, savage pleasure tears through me.

The boys don't let me stop though, using my cunt and my ass, working my mouth, keeping my fingers on their cocks. Callum comes first, fisting my hair in his hand, letting his pretty head fall back, blond hair painted gold by the candlelight. Flicking my eyes up, I can see all his tattoos, all his scars, that freshly healed pink slash on the front of his throat.

He shudders and fills my mouth with his seed before stumbling back a single step and crashing to his knees on the floor. He winces at the pain in his knees, but that doesn't do a damn thing to take the lustful satisfaction and wonder out of his eyes. He's too used to pain, too used to being held and coddled and kept by it. It's just a part of him, a part of all of us, and it has become the ties that bind.

"Shit," Cal murmurs, his breathing ragged, his blue eyes locked with mine as Aaron powers into me, joining his thrusts with Victor's. When Aaron finally comes, it's with a ragged cry and then a sharp bite on the side of my throat that has me buckling and struggling against another climax. I'm not sure how many I can take; my body already feels like it's falling apart. Yet ... I'm still not done.

I finished my list.

I have my boys.

I want *more*.

Royalty loves to feast, right?

Aaron collapses, lying beside Oscar with his head pillowed on his hands, panting, watching. That's when Oscar finishes, shuddering and squeezing my fist against his inked length, spilling his cum against my skin in hot, white ropes. As he's doing that, Hael moves around behind me, and I can tell by the way Victor is looking up and past me that he's staring at his friend.

Coming full circle from that night when Vic kicked Hael out of the room

and off of me, Hael takes his cock and presses it, not against my ass, but against my already stretched pussy.

“I don’t know if I can ...” I start, but I don’t use our safe word. I don’t want to. *This* is what I want.

Hael pushes inside of me, slow and wicked and with purposeful intent, joining Victor’s cock inside my silken pussy. It’s almost too much, almost painful, and for the briefest of moments, I consider actually saying it, calling out mare’s nest and putting a stop to this.

Then Hael begins to move in time with Vic and nothing has ever felt so perfect or so inevitable, and I can’t even remember that there’s supposed to be a place where one of them ends and I begin.

Hael comes first, reaching around me to knead and massage my breasts, teasing the almost painfully hardened peaks of my nipples. He does all of that while he pumps his seed into me, and then he, too, is gone and it’s just me and Victor, surrounded by spent boys and candlelight.

We fuck and fuck and fuck until we’re both soaked in sweat and I’m quite sure that if I spend another goddamn second looking into his ebon eyes, I’m going to die.

Look at me, his domineering gaze commands. *Look at me and watch*, the smirking shape of his mouth says.

Victor slows the rolling of my hips just before I climax again.

“Oscar, get the ropes,” he commands, and my entire body flushes ice-cold before turning into an ardent, flaming nightmare of need. *They brought ropes. They knew. Somehow, they knew what I was going to need tonight.*

Nothing in half-measures, right?

Oscar Montauk does as he’s told, collecting the bloodred rope we used on Cal, and then Victor is sitting up and Hael is lifting me off of his boss’ dick.

Hael holds me against him, my back to his front, while Oscar pushes his fogged and smudged glasses up his nose with an inked finger and then proceeds to sweep that silky rope around me. He ties my right wrist to Callum’s wrists, binding them together with careful knots. On the other side, he does the same with Aaron, connecting my left wrist to my former ex’s. With my ankles, he does the same. My right ankle is bound to Callum’s while my left is bound to Aaron’s.

And then, Oscar truly shows us all what he can do with his art, wrapping my body up in a firm but gentle caress of ties and knots, highlighting my

breasts by braiding around them and making them swell and ache. He does the same with the plump pinkness of my cunt, creating a V-shape around it with a large knot that teases my clit, and two trailing pieces of rope that frame either side of my opening. They come together over the sweet soreness of my ass, rubbing me in just the right way when I wiggle in Hael's arms.

Oscar even ties me and Hael together, binding my torso to his. I can see now why the phrase *the devil finds work for idle hands* exists. The devil has found his work here, in Oscar's beautiful rope.

"Hell is empty, and all the devils are here," he murmurs, as if he can read my mind.

Once he's finished, I'm bound and immobile, tied to Hael, to Callum, to Aaron. My legs are spread wide, my cunt highlighted and plumped up by rope while my breasts strain beneath tight loops and knots. My breathing is heavy, my lids drooping, my mouth parted.

"Excellent." Victor stands over me, looking down at Oscar's handiwork, his obsidian eyes sparkling as he takes in the sight. "Now, fuck her."

And so, Oscar does. As he enters me with a deep groan, Victor takes the last bit of rope and, with a surprising level of skill of his own, ties me and Oscar together loosely enough that he can still thrust but that he can't escape.

Not unless Vic chooses to untie us.

Oscar's mouth finds first my right breast and then my left, sucking on my nipples and using that biting caustic mouth of his to tease and flirt and lick. He bites me, too, leaving marks all over my pale skin and the demon wing tattoos on my chest. His tongue traces the fluted hollow of my collarbone as his body rubs my clit and drives into my cunt all at the same time.

Yet another orgasm hits me, one that's so powerful and violent that I'm sure I'm going to pass out and wake up to find that this is all a dream. How could it be real, with the old house creaking around us and the flames of the candles sputtering and dancing? How could it be real when Oscar finishes inside of me and then collapses on top of me while the other three boys watch, bound and helpless?

For quite some time, we stay exactly where we are. Even with the ropes on my body and my legs spread wide, muscles quivering at the strain, I actually start to fall into an endorphin-infused sleep, sated and heavy and happy.

I must actually do it, conk out for a minute, because when I blink to, Oscar is being untied and allowed to move aside, and then Victor is mounting me.

He plows me into the floor while Oscar takes over the task of teasing and suckling on my swollen nipples, sliding his fingers over my aching clit before dipping one inside of me alongside Vic's cock, not caring that he's simultaneously teasing his boss as he pleasures me.

That last orgasm, the one that lines up so perfectly with Vic's roar of satisfaction as he conquers and destroys all six of us, is mind-numbing. There is no more room for doubt or pain or wonder, I exist only for this moment and no matter what suffering I had to endure to get here, it was worth it.

It was so fucking worth it.

Victor finishes in me with a few, violent thrusts, spilling his hot seed into my womb as Oscar sits up and swipes at his mouth.

And then Vic looks down at me and our gazes clash and the room is drowning with heat and desire and dark magic.

"I love you," is what he says, and I'm not entirely sure if the words are for me and me alone. Victor slides out of me with a groan and then moves to sit back in our circle of blankets and pillows and takeout. He lifts the lid on the top of the chocolate cake and then stabs a fork directly into the middle of it.

"Jesus," Hael breathes from behind me as Oscar works quickly to untie us, using that magic of his so that the ropes seem to simply ... slough off. With another groan, I crawl forward and slump into the blankets, leaning back on one hand and then letting my head fall back, too.

The other boys join the circle and a few of them take up forks of their own to ravage that goddamn cake. Nobody speaks. Magic is too thick in the air for words. Instead, I drop my chin back down so that I can see everyone, adjusting my sore and sweat-slicked body to be more comfortable.

As I do, my fingers bump against the pocket of Callum's discarded hoodie and knock against something hard inside. *His knife*. The thought comes to me before I even reach inside the garment to find out for myself. Removing the blade, I stare at it for a long moment before setting the sheath aside.

"Bernadette?" Victor asks as I crawl over to him. I look up at his assumptive, godlike face before I take his hand and slice a thin, sharp line along the faded white edge of a repeated scar. He makes no sound as I do it, doesn't even shift the slightest bit. His breathing remains even, his eyes fixated on my face.

I slice my hand next, pressing our palms together with an abrupt inhale of pain.

“Blood in,” I reconfirm, squeezing hard. “Blood out.”

I move onto Hael next, slicing his palm, pressing our hands together. His honey-almond eyes are soft, pupils thick and irises darkened with affection as we share blood. Callum is next, and I wonder for a brief minute if this isn't going to be too much for him, considering he's already got a body covered in scars. But when I hesitate, he takes the wrist of the hand holding the knife and moves it so that the blade is pressed into his skin.

“Do it,” he tells me, so I slice into his pale flesh and make him bleed. Again, we share blood, looking into each other's eyes. Oscar is next, and I don't need to ask if he wants this; I can feel it. It'd be obvious to anyone that walked into this room, that this is all he craves. Belonging. Family. And most especially if all that belonging and all that family was drenched in blood.

Our fingers tangle together, blood smearing between our palms. And then it's Aaron's turn.

It's fitting that he'd be last in the circle today, since he was my first romantic love. He was always first, and nobody can ever take that away from us.

“Hello Bernie,” he whispers as I sit in his lap and we press our foreheads together. I cut him and we squeeze our hands together at the same time that we shut our eyes. Once we're done, Aaron reaches out his palm and presses it against Victor's.

A shudder passes through me just as one of the boards on the back window shifts and adjusts itself, letting a breeze blow into the room and extinguishing all of the candles in one, single breath.

“Blood in,” I repeat, shivering as Oscar and Callum get up to check the window, just to make sure that it really was just a side effect of an old house shifting and not a member of the GMP sneaking up on all of us, naked and sated and covered in blood. “Blood out.”

Aaron lies down with me in the blankets and we pass out.

Several hours later, I wake up to find the boys eating the last of the cake and digging into the remaining takeout. Scooting up to join them, I take another swig of whisky, dress myself, and then dig into a cake slice of my own while Aaron relights all the candles with Hael's help.

Afterward, with just my pink jacket and my panties on but nothing else, I kneel in front of the fireplace on the old wooden floors. Sucking one finger into my mouth, I make it wet and then I draw a word on the hearth of the fireplace, tracing the letters *H-A-V-O-C* into the dust. Somebody puts the crown on my head, but I'm not paying attention to them right now.

In this moment, with the candles' flames dancing and writhing around me, I take that tube of Penelope's pink lipstick and I cross out the final name on my list.

7. the mom

With a quick swipe, I apply the lipstick to my own mouth and then kiss the bottom of the page, leaving the imprint of my lips like a signature.

"Goodbye, Mom," I say, my mouth in a sharp frown but my eyes dry. "Good night."

I set the envelope aflame with a single flick of my lighter and then I toss the remainder of it into Victor's grandmother's fireplace to burn.

"So it's done then," Victor says from behind me, but I know he isn't really asking. He's just stating a fact. Even so, I reply because we all need to know for sure.

"It's done," I agree, and then he sweeps me into his arms and fucks me into the floor.

CHAPTER

TWENTY - ONE

Things are different after that night. Better. Blissful, almost. Every day that I wake up surrounded by Havoc, every day that I attend that snooty ass school and sleep in that fancy ass apartment, is a blessing I never expected to count.

Something changes between us all—as you might think, considering the orgy and the bloodletting—but in the best possible way. We’re connected, intertwined, bound and twisted together. It makes it easier to pass the time as we wait out the end of school, a year of marriage, all the steps that will bring us that much closer to Victor’s inheritance and all the power that money will bring to our fingertips.

For now, that’s all we’ve got. Our planning for Ophelia and Maxwell isn’t making much progress otherwise. But time, we can definitely pass some time here. I’m thrilled to be able to do it. Life gets so easy for a while that I start to remember some of my old hobbies. Besides working on my poetry, I’ve been catching up on binge-worthy shows, reading romance novels in the bath, and perfecting the gossip and social intel skills that every Prescott ho excels at.

Oak Valley Prep is so much more twisted than I expected. There are serpentine games being played in every classroom, barbs thrown with every pretty smile shared in the hallway. Right now, I’m watching the daughter of an oil tycoon whisper secrets into the ear of a girl—a hotel heiress, to be exact—she sabotaged just yesterday by stealing her PE uniform. The hotel heiress chick got a write-up since this is the fifth time that’s happened,

putting her at risk of suspension.

Oil Tycoon Girl was tricky, but I saw her take the uniform. She stuffed it into a trash can just outside the girls' dormitory. There are other things going on, worse things. Rich people are sick, nefarious fucks.

"I expected this place to be as dry as the Sahara," I admit, sitting up at the outdoor table where we're eating. Victor is smoking, even though he gets written-up almost daily for it. Our connections to the schoolboard hold strong. Guess it's pretty big news when you can out someone for being a pedophile—with undeniable proof, too. "But this is a wet, juicy miasma of backstabbing, theft, and fucking. These Oak Valley kids could give Prescott ones a run for their money in the bullshit and drama department."

"Fuller High is where all the normal kids go," Hael says, chewing his food absently. He looks down at his plate like he misses his mom's food immensely. Like, the grub here is good, but it's the kind of good that only money can buy. And I mean that in the most negative way possible. Back in Prescott, there's nothing money can buy. It's all about the skill and ingenuity of the people.

This food is as soulless as the fancy coffee.

"So says the man who allowed Brittany Burr to worm her way into our lives," Oscar deadpans, and Hael sighs, setting his fork down on the side of his plate before lifting those honey-brown eyes up.

"Brittany is a naïve idiot, and a spoiled, demanding bitch. But she isn't Trinity Jade. And she isn't Kali Rose-Kennedy. That's all I'm saying." He glances my way, as if to apologize for defending his ex. "She'll get hers eventually—don't worry about it. As soon as that baby comes out, she'll know he belongs to Rich Pratt."

"That's almost punishment enough," I joke as Hael watches me, and we both end up smiling. "Finding out that you're not the father. Personally, I'd be devastated."

"Whoa there, princess," Vic says, even as I grit my teeth and narrow my eyes on him. He knows that I detest being called that. He knows that I'm his motherfucking queen. We proved that shit to each other, back at the house. Of course, Vic wouldn't be Vic without a little alpha-hole behavior every now and again. "You've got five possible baby daddies sitting right here. Chill that talk."

"You're a fucking asshole, you know that?" I ask him as he looks down at

me from his spot on the table, his shoes on the bench seat beside me. It's weird as fuck seeing all five Havoc Boys dressed in these hideous prep school uniforms. Only ... they don't look quite as hideous when the boys are actually wearing them. Fine, I'll admit it: they look handsome as hell. All day long, I catch girls looking. Boys, too. Mack even ogles them sometimes when we pass him and David in the courtyard. Havoc is just that goddamn pretty, I guess.

"Meaning you're not interested in kissing me and making Trinity Jade jealous?" Vic queries as Aaron rolls his eyes dramatically. I can see Trinity from the corner of my eye, watching us. She does that a lot, stares like that. I wonder if it's because she's daydreaming about killing me or daydreaming about fucking Vic.

Either way ...

I move over to where Victor's sitting, and I crawl into his lap, right in the middle of that spring-drenched courtyard with all those uppity Oak Valley brats. See, I've been dying since I got here to kick Trinity's ass—Prescott style. Only, it took me a few weeks to realize it: Trinity needs her ass handed to her to in a different way (at least for now). Physically hurting her at the art gallery and at her party did nothing to faze her, but when she got caught with James in the room at the lodge? She was mortified.

She craves approval from others; image is everything.

So, since the entire school believes her to be *married* to Victor now—we got her grandfather to play along with the charade on the pretense of Trinity writing her senior thesis on a social experiment—this is how I best make her bleed.

I grind on Vic and shudder when I feel his cock lengthening and thickening inside his slacks. Kissing and sucking up his neck, I mark him, loving the way the other students make a sharp curve around our table, interrupting the flow of traffic just to keep away from our space.

This is our territory now. Ours. We marked it fully and completely. After that pagan-esque magic ritual we performed at Vic's grandma's place a few weeks ago, I'm feeling positively untouchable.

Trinity storms over to us after a moment, fuming like ... well, like an uptight spoiled prep school girl. Her eyes blaze with fury, but the rest of her remains still, trapped in the harsh and ugly world of being a WASP. No emotion seeps out of her that isn't jammed violently past that societal filter,

as if through a sieve.

“You’re making a fool out of me,” she snarls, and that’s the god’s honest fucking truth right there. That’s exactly what I’m doing. “We are supposed to be *married* now. Married. You are to act as my husband while in a public place.”

I glance briefly back at Victor before bursting out laughing. I’m not the only one. All the boys chuckle. Because this is so classic and so fucking hilarious. What did I tell you? This bitch did not even need to get her ass handed to her with my fists. This is far more fun.

“Well, he and I are *actually* married, and you’re the one that told Ophelia that Victor could ... what was it that you said? Oh, that’s right: *you can still screw your little whore*. Guess what? That whore is his wife, and we’re going to continue to do exactly as it is that we’re doing now. Hugging. Kissing. Sneaking off to fuck.” I release Victor and stand up, turning around to face Trinity Jade with an expression that’s rife with menace, one that I really hope gets across how serious I am about this. “Do you have a problem with any of that?”

I stay where I am, reaching back as Victor lights up and hands me a cigarette. Slipping it between my lips, I watch Trinity Jade struggle with a lifetime full of entitlement and getting her way. She’s so used to that, it’s hard for her to remember that she doesn’t have the upper hand here. *Do it*, I think at her, daring her to hit me just so I can beat her ass right back. *I would love to see you swing for me*.

Except, she doesn’t. Eventually she turns on the heel of one of her hideous Mary Jane-esque shoes and takes off down the stone walkway to the girls’ side of the dorms.

“That fucking woman,” I murmur, a small tickle of excitement in my belly at one day being able to ruin her. To tell Samuel Jade that his wife is a cheater, and his daughter isn’t really his daughter biologically. That’d be a big shock for anyone to handle, but a good man would just accept that Trinity was his daughter regardless of her DNA and move on. But not these blue-blooded aristocrat types. As Victor had mentioned to his mother, some of them really do think of their children like well-bred golden retrievers.

“Serious pain in the ass,” Vic agrees as I turn back around and take my seat at our table.

“I’ve been thinking about Maxwell and Ophelia,” Oscar begins, his voice

distant and contemplative the way it is when he's really digging into an idea. He even has his trusty iPad open on the tabletop, sparking just the slightest hint of jealousy in me. *Fucking goddamn iPad*. If I ever walk in and catch him tying that tablet up in rope patterns ... "They've been spending nearly all of their time at Maxwell's home in Springfield. Otherwise, they're on a private helicopter and leaving the area. For us to launch any sort of attack on either of them, we'd have to break into the house, or we'd have to find a way to follow them via the air."

"Neither of which sounds at all feasible to me," Victor butts in, taking the cigarette back when I offer it to him. Callum continues picking at his food while Hael taps his phone against his lips and Aaron watches me like the maiden in the fairy tale he so desperately wants to rescue, just after he realizes she's turned into a knight.

"It's not," Oscar says, the edge of his lip lifting up in a slight sneer. "I'm struggling to figure out a way to safely go after either of them without getting ourselves killed. Even the best scenario has too high of a risk."

"What if we accepted one of those invitations to Ophelia's fancy dinners or parties?" I query, thinking aloud. Victor gets them all the time, these pretty pieces of paper delivered by couriers, inviting him to some rich person's house or some fancy club, some highbrow art gallery or prestigious yacht.

We decline each and every single one of them.

"Even with the Trinity deal in place," Victor begins, shaking his head and putting two fingers up to his temple. "Those are just death traps disguised in lace and leather and fancy watches. No, we won't be going to any of those."

"Where else are we going to get access to Ophelia?" I ask, because for some reason, she feels like the more pressing of our two big bad bosses. *It's because of Victor*. That much I know, but I'm not going to say it aloud, tell my husband that his abuser is my most hated person in the world right now.

There's a long pause as Hael's phone rings, and he makes a face as he glances at the screen. It's obvious without him having to say a single word that it's Brittany fucking Burr.

"Hey," he says, answering on the second ring. We're still doing our best to keep Brittany happy, to keep the information flowing. Her prophesied raid on the GMP has yet to happen, and we need to know when and where it's taking place. If we can get that information, then maybe we can actually come up with a plan.

None of us really believes that we'll all survive to collect Victor's inheritance without issue. Trinity is too much of a wildcard. Ophelia is too careful of a monster. And no matter what, I still bashed James Barrasso's head in with a Yellowstone National Park souvenir.

"Oh shit," Hael breathes, leaning forward and balancing his elbow on his knee. He chews on his thumbnail as he flicks his attention over to Vic, locking eyes with our leader. "Uh-huh." Another pause. "Fuck." He sits back up and then sighs dramatically. "Yeah, I said I'd come over this weekend. I can't just leave in the middle of class for another doctor's appointment. Sure, okay, whatever."

Only, he totally would leave if I were the one having the baby. The thought springs to my mind unbidden, and I smile, even as Hael bristles with irritation.

He hangs up and grinds his teeth for a brief moment before shoving his phone into his pocket.

"Well?" Victor asks, giving him a look. "Spill it."

"She's such a bitch," Hael murmurs, rubbing his hands over his face briefly before exhaling. "Okay, so, Brittany says she thinks the VGTF are going to raid the school."

Victor goes very, very still before glancing over at Oscar. He turns back to Hael, leaning forward and tabling an elbow on his knee.

"This school?" he queries, and Hael gives a curt nod.

"On graduation day," he continues, and a shiver takes over me.

Holy fuck. How ... appropriate.

"Here," Victor repeats, grinding his jaw for a moment as Aaron stands up from his seat, like he just can't take the excitement anymore, and Callum finally puts down his fork. He used to not like to eat at Prescott High, so that everyone would see him as a monster. Here, everybody already does, so he's let the habit of a Pepsi and a cigarette for lunch slip a little.

"If it's happening here then Sara Young must've gotten all the information she needs to bust the pedo ring," Aaron guesses, and I just know in the pit of my stomach that he's right. There is no way in fuck that I dropped that information to the uptight VGTF agent without seeing results. "Half the parents here are involved in it somehow, so it makes sense."

"It also means that Maxwell Barrasso is likely to be at Oak Valley Prep on graduation day," Oscar explains, tapping his long fingers against the side of

the table. He exchanges yet another look with Vic as my mind spins through the information.

“Ophelia is planning on coming to my graduation,” Victor continues, and I blink in surprise because I hadn’t heard that yet. “She told me as much on the last phone call we had.”

“This is great,” I say, drawing all of their attention over to me. “If they’re coming here on graduation day, then that’s when we get them. We get them *before* the graduation ceremony. I don’t know how just yet, but we do.”

“If the raid is being planned for this school,” Oscar continues, pushing his glasses up his nose with his middle finger. “Then there is no way in hell we are going to be able to deal with Maxwell and Ophelia before somebody sees us. And the goal is to remain in front of, rather than behind, bars.”

I ignore his imperious tone. He has a good point, but I feel like this is our best chance.

“Contingency plan, remember? Like the one we used for Mason? If something goes wrong, we have the VGTF as our own, personal backup.” I stand up and start pacing, Cal’s blue eyes watching me as I do. Always watching. A shiver takes over me.

“If they end up in prison, then won’t they just rule from behind-the-scenes? That won’t help us out any at all.” Hael repeats something we’ve already talked about, a worry and a fear that niggle at me every day. “We’ll still have to be careful; we’ll still have to worry.”

And he’s right.

If the GMP maintains their leader—even from inside a prison cell—they might still come after us. After the girls. *Motherfucker*.

“There is no way in *fuck* that we are raiding Maxwell’s house.” Oscar spiders his fingers on his knee and taps them against the perfect crease in his suit. “We are not attending one of those awful parties. And we are certainly *not* performing a coup d’état on the day of a raid. Think up something else.” He snaps this out, but I know it’s not directed at me in particular. He’s just frustrated because Oscar Montauk can *always* think his way out of a tight spot.

Just ... maybe not this time.

“This is good news,” Vic muses slowly, his king voice firmly fixed in place. This is the voice that brooks no argument, that says this conversation is coming to an interlude. Emotions are too high, and we all need more time to

think. “Because this means that no matter what, after graduation day, the VGTF will be swarming into the GMP’s ranks. Even if Maxwell is captured, it’ll sow discord. Regardless, this is good for us, a near guarantee at a reprieve.”

He stands up from the table, but I can see in his face that he isn’t happy.

Because I know for a fucking fact that all of that anger he’s carrying inside of him, it has to be unleashed soon. And on someone. And that someone *has* to be Ophelia fucking Mars.

It just has to be.

Victor takes off for the apartment with his loyal lords—and his queen—following along behind him.

Vera and I hang out together on a weekend where neither of us is busy. We start at her auntie’s place, getting our nails done and gossiping about boys. I might be permanently sealed to five boys through blood, but Vera has many more boyfriends than I do. Sometimes at the same time, sometimes not. Just depends.

“The last two guys I dated were both too bossy,” she tells me as I examine my red nails with the little coffins painted on them. Each coffin has a tiny white letter on the front, spelling out *Havoc* on both hands. The same silver ring is pierced through the pointer finger on my left hand, and I decide that I like it better there than on my right. “I seriously don’t understand how you put up with it.” She flicks her pale eyes toward the window, her red hair buzzed into a slanted ‘A’ inside of a circle—the symbol for anarchy.

Stacey’s girls were all about that, a wild tumble of femininity and violence and fun. They’re still that way, it seems, as they pass in and out of the apartment like it’s their official meeting place. Guess it kind of is.

“Anyway,” Vera continues, her gaze still on the window. She can’t see the five boys waiting for me downstairs, but she knows they’re there. I don’t tell her that at this point, our obsession is strong enough to kill us all. She just assumes that they’re following me around for the most pertinent reason: we are still under threat from the GMP. At all times, in all places. The nerve of it is rubbing me raw, making me feel like I’m on a race to the finish line.

Somehow, someway, I can guess how it’s going to end, and my stomach

does a strange somersault, turning on a sudden font of nausea. If I hadn't just taken another pregnancy test and saw that it came up negative, I might think I was pregnant. Again. A shiver takes over me as I blow on my nails—even though they're already dry. Force of habit, I guess.

“Anyway?” I query, sitting back in the swivel chair and turning to face Vera. She's dressed in a fuzzy pink sweater, cropped at the navel and decorated with a BlackCraft Cult label. Very cute, very Prescott. She probably stole it. “What?”

“I just wanted to say that getting paid to work for y'all is helping a lot of the girls out.” Vera shrugs her shoulders like it's nothing, but it's not. It's what Stacey would've wanted and that's important to me.

“You guys do good work,” I admit, and they really do. They tell us exactly where the GMP is at all times, via their sex work and through the grapevine of gossip that travels down from Portland. We have a pretty clear idea of where the bulk of the Grand Murder Party is at all times, where Ophelia is, where Maxwell is. If they remain in the state of Oregon, we have eyes on them.

Outside of it, well, that's part of the problem, isn't it?

“You've got a good thing going on,” Vera tells me, flicking her attention back to the window again. “I mean, besides having to deal with those hulking beasts on your ass all the time.”

Only, she doesn't know that I just *love* the idea of those hulking beasts on my ass—like, quite literally *on* or *in* my ass. If we could just be together, eating pizza or fucking or talking at all times, I would be happy. The Havoc Boys are all that I need. Them, and Heather, Ashley and Kara. We don't get to spend a lot of time with the girls since each interaction we have presents a risk, but I can at least see them every day—even if it's from afar.

I leave Vera's aunt a huge tip and we make our way downstairs, sweeping past the boys and down the sidewalk. Vera keeps hold of my elbow as we go and then leads me to her favorite lunch place, this scary ass hole-in-the-wall that serves barbecue sandwiches wrapped in newspaper.

It's legit one of the best things I've ever eaten in my life.

I suck a bit of sauce from the tip of one finger, noticing that the boys are watching me like they're on a hunt. Ignoring them, I turn in my seat until I'm facing Vera completely.

“I stopped by Stacey's grave the other day,” she tells me casually, but the

melancholy in her voice is impossible to miss. My heart gives a sharp and violent seize as I think about Stacey's last moments, how she mouthed off to that GMP motherfucker right before she died. It was how she'd want to go out, I think, if she'd had to choose a way to go in that moment. "It was covered in flowers and tubes of lipstick and shoes and dresses ..." Vera trails off with a sigh and then runs her hand over the top of her shaved head. There's still a big 'S' shaved into the side opposite the anarchy symbol, and I can't imagine that she'll be getting rid of it anytime soon. Or, maybe like, ever.

"I really need to take a moment to visit my sister's grave," I say, shoving my fingers through my hair. Nobody ever contacted me about Pamela's body. I'm not sure if that matters or not. Even if they had, I would've told the county to bury her. She doesn't have any power over me anymore. Not a single person whose name was on that goddamn list can ever control me or hurt me or make me feel powerless again. "My little sister keeps asking and asking, but it isn't safe right now. Shit, we can barely spend any time together as it is. When we do, it has to be in a private place where nobody else can see."

The last thing I need is for the GMP to figure out where Heather is, who Heather is, and how much she means to me. Kara and Ashley, too, of course. That'd be my biggest fucking nightmare.

Vera reaches over and gives my hand a squeeze and a pat, her mouth pursed into that sympathetic *so sorry, girl* face she gets when she's acknowledging other people's tragedies. Every time we hang out, I see other girls come up to her with some problem or another, and it's always this face that she gives them, one that recognizes pain and validates it.

"Graves are for the living, not the dead. So take your time getting over there. I doubt your big sister would want you to risk your own life to visit her corpse." Vera shrugs, having put her wisdom out there in the most ineloquent way possible. I smile anyway and take another bite of my sandwich. "As far as your little sister goes, trust me: better safe than sorry." Those blue-gray eyes of hers stare into her soda, watching bubbles pop. After a moment, she reaches out and gives it a stir with her straw. I bet she's thinking about Stacey again, or about the other girl they lost after the robbery went bad. I don't let myself think about what might've happened to that girl ...

"So." I set my sandwich down again, looking around the ratchet fucking

shithole we're sitting in with its portable air conditioning unit dripping across the floor and the abandoned buffet in the corner, stacked with unused chairs. Ahh, Prescott. Classiest place on earth. "You called me here. What did you want to talk about?" I look at Vera expectantly, and she stares right back at me like I'm a crazy person.

"You just assumed I only called you here because I had business?" she clarifies, and it takes me a moment to think about it, but then I shrug.

"Yeah, I mean, I guess I did. It isn't?" My stomach flutters strangely, and I realize I'm getting a friend crush. Like, maybe for the first time in years, I could be making a platonic friend. *Oh, the boys are going to be so jealous . . .* I take another bite of sandwich to disguise my total ineptitude for friendship. Let's just say, it's been a while. From sophomore year to the beginning of senior year, I was basically alone. Not even just that, but actively despised and hated, too.

"Girl, seriously?" Vera asks, and then she laughs, leaning back in her chair and giving me a long sigh as she looks me over. "Stacey liked you, you know." I just keep eating my sandwich because I'm not entirely sure how to respond to that. It's too sad in so many ways, to think that maybe Stacey felt a connection to me the way I did to her.

"Thanks." That's all I manage to get out, but then, we're both Prescott bitches so we speak the same language. Vera can read all of the myriad things I'm trying to say with that one word. *Thank you for telling me that. I liked her, too. I also thought we might become good friends.*

"After this, come over," she tells me with a small nod of her chin. "Hang out with the girls, drink a little. Relax. We're just having a small casual birthday party thing for Tiff."

Ah, Tiff, the one with the braids who hates me.

"She despises me," I say, and Vera shrugs again, sipping her soda with a sharp grin building on her heavily painted lips.

"Maybe a little, but she never turns a Prescott girl down at the door. Come on, say yes."

I think for a minute and then pause when Victor's heavy hand rests on my shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. When I glance up at him, I can tell that he's been listening in on the conversation.

"Go," he tells me as Vera makes a scoffing noise. Like, I'm sure she thinks this is ridiculous, me needing permission from my harem of men to attend a

Prescott party. But that's not what this is about at all. Victor isn't ordering me around or pissing testosterone in an alpha male show of dominance the way he does sometimes. Instead, he's trying to be supportive. He wants me to go, to make friends. I can tell all of that in his one-word response, just the way Vera could with mine. "We'll make sure you stay safe."

Victor lets go of me and heads back to the table with the boys as I glance back over at Vera to find her giving me a long, studying sort of look.

"You are cock-whipped," she tells me, and I scoff.

"I am fucking not," I growl back because I've totally kicked bitch's asses for less. But then Vera just laughs, and I shake my head. "I am not cock-whipped. If anything, *they* are the ones that are pussy-whipped."

"Ah, right," she says, standing up from her chair as I clean my fingers off with the napkin and then pick up my garbage to chuck in the bin on the way past. "Victor motherfucking Channing is pussy-whipped as he orders your ass around."

"He actively encourages me to fuck four other dudes," I remind her as we step outside into the warm afternoon sunshine. Vera thinks about that for a moment and then sighs.

"Okay, okay, you've got me with that one. Now, you spoiled ass Oak Valley Prep ho, come with me and get your southside on for the love of god. Spend too much time at that palace and you'll forget your roots."

I let Vera lead me down the sidewalk with the boys following behind. What I don't tell her is that I could never forget my roots. The origins of my story are wrapped around my heart in thorns, briars that make me bleed even as I make new memories and roses bloom. No, forgetting is not nor ever will be an option.

Some people have material things to fill the endless void in their hearts; in Prescott, we make bonds. That's how we fill that dark void up until it's overflowing.

When we get to Tiff's house and look back, I see all five boys slip into skeleton masks and my mouth quirks into a smile. How they do shit like that, coordinated like a group of dancers, I'll never quite understand.

Vera grabs my hand and drags me into the tiny rundown shotgun house at the edge of the train tracks.

That night, I experience the most normal teenage Prescott party that I have ever been to in my life. No GMP members, no shootings, no dead teens, no

stranglings, no bodies buried alive. Just ... alcohol and weed and loud music from tinny speakers and dancing with five interchangeable boys in skeleton masks.

At the end of the night, one of them slips a mask on my face, carries my tired ass out to the car and drives me home. I only wake up once more, when I've been tucked carefully into bed and surrounded by five warm, hard bodies.

That's when I finally grab onto and hold something I've always wanted: *normalcy*.

And we are close. We are so motherfucking close, I can *taste* it.

The thing is, someone—Aaron, actually—once told me this: *you chose to dig in deep, just for a little taste of vengeance. It won't be as sweet as you think, cupcake. In fact ... you'll find it leaves the taste of ash in your mouth; it's almost obscene.*

Ash ... That isn't what I'm actually tasting, is it?

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CHAPTER

T W E N T Y - T W O

Because things can never be too rosy for too long, a few weeks after Tiff's party, I'm sitting in the living room with Aaron while the two of us try to puzzle out some of our homework together. We could ask Vic or Oscar or even Cal for help—and we probably will—but not yet. We're both too stubborn to give in that easily.

Instead, we've been sitting here for almost two hours working on the same set of math problems. At least we have that in common, me and Aaron, our shitty ass remedial math course. Also, since neither of us is used to all this fancy ass iPad learning and shit, we try writing the problems down on a piece of paper like a proper 90s kid and actually manage to solve a few.

Hael lounges across from us, reading on his phone. He and Aaron think they're slick, that I haven't noticed that they've both downloaded some reverse harem novels to dig into. And by reverse harem, I mean books that feature one main female chick with at least three dedicated dudes.

Basically, my life.

Although I'm not sure how many readers would want to jump into this shit-filled pond—even with all the hot-ass man candy and the rope tying and the orgies and the multiple orgasms and ... oh, wait. Never mind. I'd jump my ass into this shit just for the boys.

"Fuck," Hael blurts suddenly, and I flick my gaze up to find him staring at his phone, eyes wide, blood draining from his face. "Shit, shit, shit. I have to

go.” He shoves up to his feet and, since he’s only wearing boxers, grabs the first pair of pants he can find which just so happen to be Callum’s.

Hael snatches the clean black boardshorts from a folded pile on the chair near the breakfast bar and yanks them on while Victor emerges from the hall and narrows his eyes on his friend.

“What’s going on?” he asks, and it’s only partially a question. Mostly, it’s an order: *tell me. Now.*

“My mom ...” Hael starts, and that’s all he needs to say. We don’t waste any time in dragging on jackets and slipping feet into shoes. In less than a minute, we’re all standing in the elevator while Hael drags his fingers through his bloodred hair. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he’s murmuring as he stares down at a text on his phone screen.

Aide moi!

I don’t have to speak French to guess what that one means: *help me.*

Then, underneath it, just a single word.

Martin.

Hael looks like he’s about to crack as he storms up to the student valet in just such a way that I feel compelled to grab his arm. My fingers curl around his taut bicep, but I don’t dig my nails into his skin the way my mother once did to me.

“Hael.” It’s all I have to say. He stops short and grits his teeth, casting his look down on me with his beautiful brown eyes that very clearly echoes his mother’s words.

“*Aide moi,*” he breathes, and I reach down to curl my fingers through his as Victor deals with the valet instead, instructing him to bring the Camaro and the Bronco around. Meanwhile, I curl my body against Hael’s chest, burying my head in the crook of his neck and pressing light kisses there that have him shuddering and relaxing against me. He releases my hand and bands his arms around me, holding me close while Aaron, Oscar, and Callum wait beside us.

Once the Camaro is brought around, and Hael finally releases me, his expression is no less rife with violence, but he’s got back some semblance of control. Together, we get into the Camaro while the rest of the boys use the Bronco, Aaron at the wheel.

It’s like, after that night at Vic’s grandmother’s house—*our* future house, you know, if we don’t end up dead—everything’s changed. The boys behave better around one another, and my connection is stronger to them than ever.

That's how I know I need to rest my hand on Hael's leg as he drives, how I know I should push my fingers up beneath the edge of the shorts so I can touch his skin. He shivers, hands clenching around the wheel as we make the drive from Oak Valley Prep to the Four Corners neighborhood. It's a stark study in classism; you can practically see the stratified layers of wealth being stripped away during the drive.

"If he's hurt her ..." Hael begins, and then he shakes his head, swiping a hand down his face.

He doesn't have to have to say anything more. I know what he wants. I know what he's wanted for a long, long time.

It's the same thing Victor wants for Ophelia, that I wanted for Pamela, that Oscar dreams about with his dead father. Vengeance. Payback. Some restitution for wrongs committed.

Unfortunately, we still have a squad car on our ass. That, and Sara Young isn't the type of person that lets things go. For now, we've earned her forgiveness and begrudging acceptance, but that's only because the cards have fallen in just such a way that it looks like Havoc is almost entirely innocent of any wrongdoing.

The violence at Prescott High, that was self-defense. The bodies on Tom's land are related to Ophelia and Neil and the GMP. Pamela killed Kali along with Penelope. It all fits together just right, but if we're not careful, if we mess up even one time, in even one, small, seemingly insignificant way, then Sara and Constantine will nail us to the cross.

So as much as Hael wants to hurt his father today, as much as I want to hurt the man myself, we can't do anything of the sort. There is no way to get rid of that man with two cops sitting outside the house, and not have it traced back to us. We could claim self-defense maybe, but is it worth the risk?

We pull onto the lawn, right into those fading tire tracks that I took note of the first day I saw this place. The only thing that's changed now is that those tracks are much less deep since Hael doesn't live here anymore. I know it's been hard on his mother. He's said as much. But it's also so much better for her son to be with us at Oak Valley.

"*Maman!*" Hael shouts, using his key to unlock the front door and shoving his way in.

Right away, it becomes apparent that something is wrong. Food burns in a pan on the stove, making the air cloudy with thick, gray smoke, and furniture

is upturned in haphazard patterns that speak to violence and mindless rage. I even spot a streak of blood on the wall near the kitchen.

The other boys are right behind us, but I leave them to deal with the burning food as Hael storms down the hallway toward his parents' room. His hands are clenched into fists, his teeth gritted so tightly that it looks like he could very well crack that pretty porcelain.

He throws open the door at the end of the hallway to find his mother in bed with her dress pushed up, his father on top of her. There's no stopping him when he goes for Martin Harbin, ripping the man off the bed with a strong grip on the back of his neck.

"Hael!" Marie calls out, scrambling off the bed and pushing her dress back in place. Her makeup is smeared; it's obvious she's been crying. She also has a fresh bruise blooming on her cheek, a split lip, and finger-shaped bruises on her upper arms. "Hael, stop!"

But he isn't stopping. Hael has officially lost his shit. He throws his father's head into the mirror above the dresser, shattering the glass as Martin scrabbles at the hand latched onto the back of his neck.

"Alright, princess," Vic says from behind me, giving me a slight shove in the lower back. "Get your man under control."

Fuck.

Hael drags Martin out a back door and onto a small, shaky deck. The wood is clearly rotting from underneath, and it feels like our weight might well topple the whole thing into the dirt. Fortunately, even if that is the case, we're only about three feet off the ground.

There's a flimsy fence, half-collapsed and drowning in blackberries that surrounds the property, but surely the cops can hear the commotion from their stakeout spot? This isn't going to last long. I can't let it, much as I might want to.

We *will* get Martin Harbin someday soon, but it cannot be here, and it cannot be today.

Hael drags his father down the three steps into the yard proper, and then he throws the man onto a cracked cement patio littered with old but serviceable furniture. Marie keeps things as well as she can, considering her lack of funds and her husband's abuse. She really does try.

Martin ends up on his back on the ground where Hael kicks him so hard in the ribs that I hear bones crack. *Oh shit.* Victor follows us out of the house in

such a casual manner that I know he's forcing himself to hold back, tucking his hands into his pockets and watching with eyes the color of a raven's feathers.

Marie scrambles down the steps just ahead of him and then grabs me by the arm, pleading with me in French. I don't understand a word she's saying, of course, but Hael snaps something back at her in such a growly, domineering way that I swear he's speaking some demonic tongue instead of the language of love.

"Make him stop," Marie whimpers, digging her nails into my arm, her green eyes blazing with unspoken pleas.

"Hael," I start, pushing Marie back gently and circling around so that I can lay my hand on his arm. "I need you to push pause for a minute."

The other Havoc boys crowd out the door, filing down the steps to create a half-circle around us. Hael ignores them, pulling a pistol from his waistband and leveling it on his father.

Every single person in that yard goes still.

"You have fucked-up one too many times," Hael warns his father, his sweet brown eyes dark with years of torment and hate. Martin struggles to sit up, blood pouring from numerous cuts on his cheeks and forehead, bits of mirrored glass in his hair. He coughs once and then groans, curling over to clutch at his side.

"If you're going to do it, then do it," Martin sneers, head still bowed in pain. "Fucking pussy."

Hael's finger tenses on the trigger, but if he pulls it, the cops will most assuredly hear a gunshot. There won't be any getting out of this. And I'm not losing one of my boys to prison.

"Hael," I breathe, tensing my fingers gently against his upper arm. He shivers and tries to pull away from me, but I follow him, refusing to let up on the light pressure of my fingertips against his sweat-slicked skin. His bloodred hair catches the spring sunshine and makes it glimmer like rubies. That fauxhawk of his always seemed so stupid to me before, like he was trying too hard to be cool. But now that I know Hael as intimately as I know myself, I understand that he just *is* cool. He doesn't have to try; it's in his blood. He wears his hair that way because he likes it. "I know you're angry right now—"

He gives a caustic laugh, interrupting me.

“Nah, I’m not just angry, I am fed the fuck up.” He steps forward and grinds the end of the gun into his father’s forehead. “You just can’t stop hurting people, can you? Marie *loves* you. I don’t understand why. For the fucking life of me, I just ...” He glances over at his mother like she’s an alien to him, like he loves her but could never understand her.

What I want to tell him but don’t, not at that moment, is that love is the most irrational thing there is. Everybody wants it, craves it; everybody chases it. Sometimes, they chase it so hard that they *think* they’ve found it when all they really have is something awful and broken and ugly. But you can’t convince someone out of love; they have to realize it for themselves.

And Marie ... She’s collapsed to her knees now, her hands covering her face. The way Hael looks at her, I know that he’d do anything for her. He’d sacrifice the world to save his mother. Except ... then his eyes shift to me and I know that I’m the exception to that rule. Me, and the Havoc Boys. His attention moves from me to Victor, to the other boys, back to Martin.

“She loves you, and you won’t stop hurting her. One day, you’re going to kill her.”

“You don’t understand a thing about us, you gangbanging fuck-up,” Martin snarls, shoving up to his feet and stumbling until he knocks his shoulder against the tumbledown fence at the rear of the property. He leans against it for support, panting, as Hael keeps the gun trained on him.

“You called me for help,” Hael tells his mom, and she starts off on him in French, yelling and screaming. “Why do you always call me for help if you’re not going to leave him? Why am I even here?”

“Hael,” Marie pleads even though it’s pretty obvious that she has no idea what she’s pleading for. Instead of turning to his mother, Hael’s eyes find mine again. This time, when I put my hand on the gun and push it so that he’s aiming at the ground instead of his father, he lets me. “He isn’t a bad man, he just ... you know how he gets when he drinks.” She stops talking, letting her head hang, red hair waving around her shoulders. Her heavily accented voice is melodious, but her words are beyond sad. She can’t be much older than Pamela, just another young Prescott mom who never got to be a child herself. I feel so fucking bad for her.

“Are you going to kick him out?” Hael asks, turning to face his mom and slipping the gun back in his waistband. He curls his arm around my waist and drags me close, holding me to him like I’m his one and only lifeline in a

storm. His eyes blaze as he stares his mother down. “You’re not, are you? You just wanted me to come and stop him from beating your ass, and then that’s it. I’m a referee and nothing more.”

“You are my son,” Marie whispers, and then she repeats it in French, “*Tu es mon Fils.*”

“Let me take you somewhere else,” Hael suggests, but this is an argument he’s had with his mother on the phone numerous times, begging her to stay somewhere else, at Aaron’s at the very least. It wouldn’t be entirely unheard of for the GMP to come for Hael’s mom. At this point, I think our tentative stalemate is the only thing that’s prevented them from moving on us. “We can find you somewhere better to stay, somewhere nicer than this shitbox.” There’s a long pause there where Hael holds his breath and his mother finally lifts her eyes up to look at his face. “*Maman*, please.”

Marie looks over at Martin and then back at her son.

“*Je n'ai nulle part où aller,*” she murmurs, and Hael makes a sound of frustration.

“She says there’s nowhere else for her to go,” he explains, cursing in French for a moment before sliding his hand over his face. He squeezes me even more tightly against him, and I put my palm over his heart, feeling it thunder inside his broad chest. “But *Maman*, there is. We have places for you to go. You don’t have to stay here; you don’t have to suffer like this.”

Tension stretches between Hael and his mother, and I look over to see Vic’s normally stoic face soften slightly as he turns away. We understand what it’s like to be betrayed by a mother. Shit, we all do. Every single one of us has been betrayed by close family.

Every single one.

The ties binding our hearts seem to tighten and knot, drawing our souls closer together even as we stand in that janky ass yard in the middle of the second worst neighborhood in Springfield. There used to be a high school here, too, almost twenty years past, but it’s long since been shut down, so ... Prescott High it is for Four Corners residents.

“Okay,” Marie says after a moment, and Hael nearly startles in surprise.

“What?” he asks, blinking furiously for a moment. “*Quoi?*”

“I’ll go with you,” Marie reconfirms, lifting her chin. Her bruised and battered face speaks volumes; the tremble in her pale hands says even more. She’s afraid. But she’s more afraid of losing the last shred of her son’s

respect than she is of Martin. “I will go.” She mumbles something else in French that I don’t quite hear.

Hael tugs me forward and then releases me so that he can take his mother in his arms, tucking her tiny body under his chin as I stand close and Martin starts to scream obscenities from behind us.

Shock of all shocks, we hear a knock on the door a moment later.

Our police detail has heard the commotion.

With a sigh, Hael exchanges a look with me and we lead Marie into the house. I’m the one to answer the door and explain the situation—but only after righting the coffee table and one of the chairs.

The officers decide to wait on the porch for us as Victor guards the back door, keeping Martin out while we pack up some things for Marie. While Hael helps his mom, I peek into his room and see that he managed to pack up most of his things before the move to Oak Valley, including all those superhero comics and graphic novels. There are boxes here and there at the apartment, stacked in the third spare bedroom, but I never quite put together what might be in them.

“Blackbird,” Hael says, drawing my attention around. I bite my lip in embarrassment at having been caught scouting out his room, but Hael just takes my head between his hands and kisses my mouth. “Thank you,” he breathes, but for what, I’m not sure. I hardly did a damn thing.

I decide to ask what he means by that and Hael pauses, pressing his forehead to mine.

“Marie,” he says, closing his eyes for a moment. “What she said to me in French ... *Je vais le quitter car je vois à quel point tu l'aimes. Quand je vous regarde tous les deux, je n'arrive plus à faire semblant.* It means ... she’s leaving because she sees how much I love you, that when she looks at us, she can’t bear to pretend anymore.”

He stands up and releases me, but my cheeks are blazing and I’m not quite sure what to say.

In the end, I say nothing, and we lead Marie out to the Camaro. For now, we take her to Aaron’s place. Since it’s a well-known fact that we aren’t living there and haven’t been for months, it’s fairly safe. Especially located as it is between Fuller and Prescott, half-normality and half-Havoc territory.

Hael gets his mother set up in the master bedroom as Aaron and I wait in the living room and the rest of the boys sweep the yard and the upstairs, just

in case. You can never be too careful in a gang war.

“I miss this place,” Aaron tells me as we lean together, shoulder to shoulder.

“Me, too,” I say, but then I think about Marie living here and not being afraid and making pralines in the kitchen, and the feeling of missing the house doesn’t seem quite so strong anymore.

“She’s asleep,” Hael says as he comes out of the room, rubbing at his temple with two fingers. “We’ll leave some guys to watch over the house, but I’d feel better if she wasn’t alone.”

“You can’t stay,” I tell him, and it’s not just because I’m being selfish. It’s because Ophelia knows the truth now: it doesn’t matter which part of Havoc she gets ahold of. If she can capture a single one of us in her clawed fingers, then we have no choice but to serve her whims.

“Aww, missing me already?” Hael asks, giving my hair a tousle as Oscar comes down the stairs, Victor emerges from the direction of the laundry room/weed bathroom/and garage area, and Callum slips in from outside. “No, I’m not staying here, but I might call my aunt or something. She lives in New Orleans.” Hael pauses briefly and sighs, like this isn’t the outcome he wants but the outcome that might be necessary. “I think my mother should move back home. She’d be happier in Louisiana; she only ever came here for Martin.”

“If she’ll go, we’ll buy her a plane ticket,” Vic agrees, and then, with one, last look at the house, we leave out the front door and pile into the cars.

As we do, I text Sara Young and let her know what’s going on.

Just as I’d hoped, she agrees to send a car over here for at least a night or two which makes me feel better.

She isn’t so bad, after all, that doe-eyed VGTF agent.

CHAPTER

T W E N T Y - T H R E E

In late May, Brittany Burr gives birth to a beautiful baby boy, eight pounds six ounces. I decide to pay her a visit just a few days later, when she's resting at home and her father—the infamous Forrest Burr—is out of the house.

Hael knocks on the door to get her to open it, but it's me who ends up pushing past to head inside.

“What ...” Brittany starts, glancing back at Hael Harbin as he waves and gives a tight-lipped smile before yanking the front door closed without bothering to come in himself. I sweep down the hall as Brittany stumbles after me, growing more furious by the second. “What the fuck are you doing here?” she demands as I find the kitchen and start rummaging around for a vase, so I can put the flowers I bought her into it.

Conveniently, I find a lovely crystal vase in the cabinet above the kitchen sink

“I came here to congratulate you on your new arrival,” I say, spotting a baby monitor on the counter. Based on the image on the screen and the near perfect silence of the house, I take it to mean the kid is still asleep. “And to bring these flowers by.”

Brittany glares at me from dark brown eyes lined with purple circles underneath. Her face is drawn and tired and her pouty mouth is turned down in a vicious frown. Hael never came to the hospital to see her—which she knows. And maybe by now she's already figured out that the kid isn't his?

That much, I'm not sure since most babies are born kind of looking the same anyway.

"Why are you inside my goddamn house and Hael isn't?" Brittany tries again to get me to answer her, but I'm too busy fluffing flowers in the vase and stepping back to admire my handiwork. I cast her a knowing glance and her face flushes a funny purple-red color.

"Girl, you know why I'm here," I say, but Brittany is still shaking her head at me, like she doesn't want to believe it. But she knows. She fucking knows before I say a goddamn word.

"I want to see Hael," she demands, turning on her heel and heading for the front door again. I cut her off and she comes up short, reaching out a hand to brace herself against the wall, her white nightgown fluttering around her thighs. I lift a brow up.

"That's too damn bad, isn't it?" I ask, and Brittany's face scrunches up like she might start crying, right here in front of me which, really, would probably be one of those moments that would haunt her for the rest of her life. "Because you're not going to see Hael today. In fact, you may never see Hael Harbin ever again."

"He's the ... he's the father of my baby," Brittany sputters, pushing back limp blond hair from her face. I'd almost feel bad for her if she hadn't cheated on Hael and then broken her bargain with Havoc. The thing is, there's one gang you don't mess with at Prescott High. And this girl? She messed with us. Big time.

"No, Brittany," I start, letting my voice drop to a placating coo. "He isn't. Look, I haven't seen the baby but Rich Pratt and Hael Harbin ... well, they look nothing alike. And your kid, he's got Rich's DNA."

"You're a liar; you tampered with the DNA results," she blurts, which is the very lie we told her to get her help to begin with. But it doesn't matter now. Because we at least have a backup plan for Maxwell, and we have a backup plan for Ophelia, and the VGTF is dropping the hammer on every pedophile in town. With the GMP being pulled apart limb from limb via Sara Young, we don't need this girl's help. At least, we don't need her to think Hael is on her side in order to get it.

"Mm," I say, leaning a shoulder against the wall and shrugging loosely with the other. "We really didn't. I mean, we lied to you so that you'd keep feeding us information, but that's about it."

Brittany's face is so tight, it looks like her skin might split open and a monster might come tumbling out. In the same breath, she looks like a little girl who's just been told that Santa doesn't exist and God isn't real and the tooth fairy is really just a demon with too-sharp teeth.

"I bet you can tell, huh?" I start, not bothering to even try with empathy. Brittany Burr is a lucky woman today, and I decide it's best to remind her of that. "With the baby, I mean. You saw his face and you probably figured it out because he looks nothing like Hael."

"Babies don't look like anyone or anything," Brittany snaps back at me, her teeth gritting in anger. She looks so young and tired and haggard right now that I decide this is enough punishment for her. Being a young single mom is going to be tough—especially with her ultra-judgy family and friends around. We toyed with the idea of running Rich Pratt out of town or threatening him into maintaining distance from Brittany and the baby, but I decided that was more a punishment for the kid than anyone else.

I might be a monster, but I'm not going to rule like one.

"Anyway," I continue, pushing up from the wall and heading back in the direction of the kitchen. Brittany tries at first to keep me back by extending her arm and placing her palm flat on the wall, but I simply grab her wrist and move her out of the way. She knows she can't fight me and, luckily for her, she doesn't even try. "My point is this: you are a very lucky girl, Brittany."

"I'm going to call my father and tell him you're here harassing me. And then I'm going to tell him everything I've ever heard about Havoc and—"

I cut her off by raising a single finger. With the other hand, I yank open her fridge and hunt around inside until I find a bottle of peach-flavored iced tea. Most of the time, these fruit teas taste like sugary juice. This one only has a hint of peach and a dash of honey, and I decide that even if I have to go to that posh supermarket in downtown Fuller that's full of the whitest white people you ever did see, that I'll go just to buy this.

"Do you remember your visit to the cabin?" I ask, looking back at her. It takes Brittany a full thirty seconds for that to register, or maybe it's just that I continue prompting. "You know." I gesture loosely at my arms and then point over my shoulder at my back, reminding her of the cuts and bruises, the burn marks, and all the new scars she probably has.

Her face pales, as if she already knows what it is that I'm going to say.

"You owe that beautiful trip to Havoc."

Another pause. Brittany stumbles forward and just barely catches herself on the raised portion of the counter where a line of tall-backed stools sits. She drags herself into one, clutching the baby monitor to her chest while she stares at me like the devil I know I am.

“Did you not assume there was a reason Havoc would take on any request—no matter the content? That our prices mean nothing, that our rules are nothing. Brittany, the one currency you can carry is truth, and you spent all of it. You owed us in blood.”

“You did that,” she whispers, beginning to shake. Her hands tremble as her white-knuckled grip hugs the baby monitor even closer to her chest. “You and Hael. Hael ...” She trails off and a slight sob comes out on the end. “All along ... oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my fucking god.”

“You betrayed us, Brittany. You sent daddy Forrest to the school to drag my boys out in handcuffs, even though we’d fulfilled the end of our bargain. You were the one that failed to pay, and we were owed our pound of flesh.” I take a second iced tea out of the fridge before moving over to stand in front of her. The top makes a gentle popping sound as I twist it off and Brittany jumps like a startled deer. “So this is us, collecting on our debt. You are not to see Hael or speak to Hael. If you pass him in public, you will keep walking and you will think about how cheating on him royally fucked your life up in so many ways.”

I take a sip of my drink as Brittany squeezes her eyes shut, salty tears escaping to run down her cheeks.

“The reason you are lucky is this: Hael is a genuinely good and wonderful human being. Even though you would’ve deserved having us take bolt cutters to your pretty fingers”—Brittany makes a choking sound and I wonder if she isn’t putting together Vaughn’s *accident* with the words I just said—“Hael doesn’t like to see women suffer. Actually, he can’t stand it. So instead of physical pain, I’m leaving you with the emotional scar of knowing that you had him for a short while and you screwed that up.”

Of course, knowing Hael as I do now, and knowing that the two of us are inextricably entwined, that we both belong to Havoc first and foremost, I’m aware that Brittany never could’ve had Hael to begin with. If she hadn’t cheated on him, then he would’ve broken up with her when I called Havoc and became a Havoc Girl for real.

Still, Brittany broke her deal with us and so this is what she deserves, the

loss of a beautiful and poignant possibility, one that would've changed her life for the better. Despite everything, I do honestly believe she was in love with Hael Harbin.

"You lost Hael to me through your own, ugly actions, and now here you are, covered in fresh scars and with the daunting task of starting all over again with a new baby daddy." The edge of my lip quirks up in an almost-smile. A devil's smile. The smile of tricksters and mischief-makers and Havoc wreckers. "You're also not fully off the hook just yet."

Brittany lets out another hiccupping sob, eyelids still firmly squeezed shut, arms still clutching the monitor to her chest.

I take the card from the bouquet of flowers, the one that says *We'll be in touch* with soft, feminine letters, letters that I wrote while thinking of Penelope and trying to imitate her inimitable handwriting. This I lay on the counter in front of Brittany.

Slowly, nervously, she parts her lids, flinching as I draw my arm back, as if I'd actually hit her inside this house or say anything that could ever be used against me in a court of law. Not that it *really* matters because Oscar hacked into the Burr's security system and stopped it from recording temporarily.

Still, it never hurts to be too careful.

"If we call and ask you questions, you answer them." I level my gaze on Brittany's and the threat is clear: you belong to us now. Just like Vaughn. Just like Vera. Another person in the swirl of planets and stars that is the city of Springfield. Eventually, every part of this solar system will belong to us. "Don't make the mistake of upsetting us again. If *anything* changes with the graduation day plan, we expect to hear it from you first."

I leave the card where it is and start in the direction of the door, just as the baby begins to cry, his strong voice crackling over the monitor as Brittany stumbles to catch up with me. She follows me all the way to the front door and out, looking past me down the lawn toward where Hael waits in the Camaro.

When I glance back and see her face cracking and shattering into a million pieces, I know that we've done the right thing here. Well, it's certainly a *wrong* type of thing, but it's correct for us.

"Hael," Brittany says, but her voice is soft enough that the sound barely carries to me, let alone to my lover sitting in the Camaro and tapping his palms against the wheel in time to some classic rock song that I can barely

hear. I pause briefly, watching tears stream down Brittany's face before she slams the door and I'm left alone in the sunshine on the Burr's front lawn.

"Good riddance," I say, saluting the house with two fingers before I turn back to the Camaro, open the door, and climb inside.

"It's done?" Hael asks, maintaining his stare out the windshield. I nod my head, leaning over so that I can press a purple-tinted kiss to his cheek. Today's lip color is called *Big Fat Mistake*. Sorry, Britt, but you done fucked-up.

"It's done," I say, feeling this strange sense of coming full circle from the day Hael and I sat outside a coffee shop and worried about DNA results together. He exhales sharply and then reaches over to curl his fingers through mine. We exchange a look, and his face softens to something caught between shame and affection.

"I'm sorry I'm such a screw-up," he says, looking me over like he doesn't deserve me. But he does. They all do, these awful Havoc Boys. We're just made for each other in a way that's impossible to explain, a craving that hurts even as it nourishes, that makes me bleed even as I purr with pleasure. Nothing worth having is easy or painless, that much I know for sure. "Seems like I'm always the one bringing the drama."

"Brittany came in handy," I tell him honestly. Without her, we wouldn't know about the graduation day raid. That alone is worth the trouble, although if I could go back in time and keep that bitch from ever touching my lover, I'd do it.

"I suppose she did," Hael admits, but he still looks troubled, like he thinks he might not be worth all this bullshit. He is. But the only way I can convince him of that is with my actions. Leaning over, I flick my tongue against the corner of his mouth, and he shivers. "Fuck, Blackbird. That mouth of yours ... you could sell sand to the desert."

I smirk at him and press another kiss to his lips before falling back into my seat.

I once read this quote from Scarlett Force in one of her infamous Emma Jean articles, and it's stuck with me for years. "*Loving one person sucks. Like, it's hard as fuck. You're always trying to balance the people in your life and wondering if you're good enough. How could all this love be directed my way? It seems surreal sometimes, but whenever that happens, I just close my eyes and count my fucking blessings. Never look a gift horse in the mouth.*"

“What’s on the agenda for today?” I ask as Hael carefully drives out of Brittany’s posh neighborhood, waving briefly at Forrest Burr as he heads past us in his Hummer. I wonder what, if anything, Brittany will tell him? Doesn’t matter. She doesn’t have anything she can use against us but hearsay. Wonder how it’ll go over in the same conversation that Brittany admits to having another possible baby daddy? Thus far, her father hasn’t heard anything but that Hael is the dad.

That should be fun.

“Stopping by to visit Vaughn,” Hael reminds me, and I groan. Just after the shooting, we had our crew drop in to question him about Stacey’s referral slip. As I’d imagined, he’d gotten a call from someone claiming to be Stacey’s father, asking for her to be brought into the office.

Vaughn is too much of a pussy—sorry, weak ball sack—to be of any use to anyone. That fingerless pervert is as neutered as Donald Asher. Regardless, we stop by his place on the way back to Oak Valley, just to see if he has anything interesting to tell us. If Sara Young wonders why we stopped by his place, eh. I’m sure we can find an easy way to explain it away.

The principal of Prescott High—yes, still the principal, even during this period of online schooling—stares at the six of us in his living room like we’ve just walked in infected with the plague. His eyes dart from Aaron to Victor to me, and then drop to the floor where they remain for most of our conversation.

“Anything else interesting you want to tell us?” Vic queries politely, relaxing on Vaughn’s couch and studying him in just such a way that he’s to be reminded to whom he belongs. Already, he’s told us all about the broken online system they’re using for the Prescott student body, how flawed it is, how much Ms. Keating despises it.

That information infuriates me to no end. Like, how is it fair that a school shooting is costing these kids even a meager chance at an education? It isn’t fucking fair and as soon as Vic has his money, we’re going to do something about it. Mark my words.

Vaughn whimpers, his injured hand clutched tightly against his chest. There are clean nubs where his fingers used to be. No way in hell this man had anything to do with setting Stacey up—he has even less backbone than he does fingers.

“Ms. Keating keeps asking about you,” Vaughn offers up, looking at me

specifically. He hands me a business card with a personal number written in pen on the back. “You’re so cloistered up in that school, she hasn’t been able to get ahold of you. She asked if I’d seen you around or if I might be able to give this to you.”

“Good boy,” Vic praises, like he’s rewarding a stray dog with a scrap. “You’ve been well-behaved, Vaughn. I’m impressed.”

Scott Vaughn, the man who tried to convince me to be a cam girl for him, just shrinks in on himself in such a way that I’m reminded of Donald. Another monster reduced to rubble at the feet of bigger, better monsters.

It’s cathartic, it really is.

Havoc has delivered everything they promised me and then some.

I add Ms. Keating’s number to my phone and then tuck the card in my pocket.

And even if Principal Vaughn is nothing but a leftover stain from an old and painful life, one who has little to no information to give us about the school or anything else for that matter, I’m glad we stopped by because this is how I end up inviting the Vice Principal to my motherfucking high school graduation.

I’d invite the cop, too, you know. That is, if she weren’t already planning on coming.

CHAPTER

TWENTY - FOUR

With the weeks flowing through our fingers like quicksand, the Havoc Boys and I settle into a routine. We get up in the morning and drink coffee together, casually walk in the direction of the girls' part of the school so we can see them, and they can see us, but nobody will know that we're related.

Sometimes, I just push my sweats down at night and bend over so all five boys can use me, fucking me one after the other to slake my insatiable thirst and make sure that I'm taking care of theirs. Last week, Aaron asked if that bothered me, if I felt like I was being used.

I laughed and told him the truth: *we all use each other, Aaron, but we all need each other, too. It's perfect. What we do is perfect.*

Standing in the kitchen now, I bounce on my toes and try not to think too hard about this morning when I bent over and put my palms on the wall of windows, spreading my legs for all five boys *before* class. Jesus.

A smile teases my lips as I blast Cardi B—I've decided I'm, like, her but in poor white trash form—and swing my hips to “*Bodak Yellow*” which is still my favorite of her songs though “*WAP*” is a close second. Embedded in the same playlist, I've got plenty of Megan Thee Stallion.

“Bernie,” Aaron murmurs, kissing the side of my neck and palming my ass. I slap him away but only for show. In reality, I crave his touch the way the ocean craves the shore. Even when it retreats, it always comes back; it simply can't help itself.

I glance over at him, silhouetted in a loose cotton t-shirt with *Wesley's* scrawled across the front of it. He's casual, barefooted, dressed in raggedy denim jeans that cup his firm ass and thighs in a way that's truly criminal. Those jeans must be old, because they cling and grab in certain places, as if Aaron's gotten a bit bulkier after purchasing them.

"Aaron," I reply carefully as he comes up behind me, sliding his hands along my ribs and kissing the side of my neck again. I swear, there's a permanent scar where he bit me during our big orgy at the house. Sometimes, I think I can still feel it throbbing, and I love that. I love that there's a mark I can recognize his touch by.

The way his sweet mouth turns sour, I know he's got something wicked in mind. Aaron steps up behind me, shoves my sweats down, and then opens the fly of his jeans. We have a quick, wild rut there at the counter, his hands kneading my breasts, his lips making love to my throat.

Afterward, when we're chilling on the couch, Oscar comes out of the first of the other two bedrooms, the one he uses as an office.

"Meeting," he barks, twisting a finger in the air in that sharp, peremptory way of his. Of course, the only person that can truly demand or order anything is Victor. Our boss pads down the hall and pauses, giving his lieutenant a bit of a look.

"Meeting, huh?" Vic asks wryly, but then he yawns and scratches loosely at the front of his t-shirt before taking a seat on the sofa across from me and Aaron. Callum crouches in the chair while Hael lounges beside his best friend. Oscar remains standing, setting the iPad on the table so we can look at a map of Oak Valley Prep. "What's up?"

"We don't have many good choices but to rest on the reality of the VGTF raiding the school. Maxwell and Ophelia *will* be arrested. At this point, that's a fact." He crosses his arms over his chest with a deep-set frown resting on his sharp lips. Instead of a suit, he's wearing a gray wife beater and silky charcoal pants that probably feel amazing brushing up against his bare cock.

I adjust myself in Aaron's arms and he hugs me close. Last night, we sat together in the living room with a single candle burning and worked on scanning those old photos of me and Penelope into the cloud. We did the same with the documents in the cardboard box and then sat there, eating chocolate and reminiscing. He remembers my sister better than any of the other boys, Aaron does.

His fingers play absently in my hair, the way they used to do when we were fifteen and newly in love. Oscar watches us for a moment before glancing back at Vic.

“I’ve calculated the risks for a dozen different scenarios, and this is our best bet.” Oscar gestures at the iPad again and then folds his fingers beneath his chin, stroking the strong column of his throat. “It’s out of our hands now.”

The fingers of Victor’s left hand clench around the end of the sofa arm, fingertips denting the leather in just such a way that it creaks. I’m not the only one looking at him; the rest of the boys are watching. They know as well as I do that letting Ophelia go means spending months more on edge, fighting, struggling, plotting, planning. It also means that Vic might never get to cross his mother off his own, personal list.

A muscle in his jaw ticks, but he nods once, nice and sharp. An agreement.

“That’s it?” Aaron asks, sitting us both up from our snuggled position on the couch. He keeps his arms around me though. “That’s how we’re going to deal with these fuckers? They stormed our school, Vic. They killed Stacey; they almost killed Callum. Your mom ...”

“I know all about my mother,” Victor replies, his voice quiet, almost menacing. He turns his attention away from us, toward the window and the glowing orb of the sun as it dips low in the sky. With just a couple of weeks left in the school year, we’re running out of time.

“Based on what we know of the raid,” I start, drawing all of the boys’ attention but for Vic’s. He keeps his gaze focused out the window instead, fingers idly teasing the leather of the couch. “It’s going to be slow and nonviolent, and likely to coincide with the final part of the ceremony. What if we go in assuming the VGTF will take care of Ophelia and Maxwell but come up with a contingency plan. I mean, it’s possible that someone tips them off about the raid; they might not even come to the graduation ceremony.”

“While I agree that it’s a fool’s error to simply assume Ophelia and Maxwell will both be there, the VGTF wouldn’t waste resources on raiding a prestigious private school without a kingpin as a prize. If they’re still coming, then they firmly believe they’ll find Maxwell, at the very least.” Oscar points at the iPad screen, tapping a red X at the end of a long, curving road. It starts at the back of the school, near the Student Parking Area. “This is the south entrance; Maxell has already planned to leave an armed motorcade waiting

here. As of this morning, the plans were still on. So, in my best estimate, there's a ninety-percent chance that he'll show up as planned."

"As Ophelia's plus one?" I ask, because I'd sort of just assumed that, that Maxwell was coming to support Ophelia. But then I thought about Trinity. Just because she doesn't want Samuel Jade or her community at large to know she's Maxwell's biological daughter, that doesn't mean Maxwell isn't committed to being a father figure in some fashion or another.

"That, I don't know," Oscar admits, shaking his head as he finally takes a seat on the end of the couch where Aaron and I are sitting. "But I must admit, Stacey's girls are coming in handy. We wouldn't have information about the motorcade without them."

"They are coming to the ceremony then," I murmur, teasing the ring pierced through the nail on my left pointer finger. "What if something they see tips them off while they're here? I mean, what if the VGTF moves in and Maxwell decides to bolt? He could whisk Ophelia off in his helicopter and we'd never see them in person again."

"Yet, they'd still be up our asses," Hael repeats with a sigh, circling us back to the same argument we've had many times before. "So what do we do?"

"How much personal security are parents allowed to bring on campus?" Cal queries, and I try my very hardest not to roll my eyes. Personal security. For a high school graduation? Jesus H. Christ, but I hate rich people. It didn't even occur to me that any of the parents would be bringing their own security crews. I guess when you're a rich hotelier or a senator, a record producer or even a rock star, you need that sort of shit. And those are exactly the types of people who have children that attend this school.

"Two guards per guest and one personal driver that must remain with the car. Guns are not technically allowed, but there won't be much enforcement of that. Really, it'll just stop Maxwell's security from open carrying." Oscar leans back in his seat as Vic rubs at his chin.

"That means if Maxwell and Ophelia both show up, they'll have four guards protecting them at most?" Aaron clarifies and Oscar nods. "Sounds like the perfect opportunity to grab them both."

"It would be, without the VGTF," Victor agrees, shaking his head. "But that means we need to find them either before they get into the auditorium or after they leave, in a place that isn't filled with people. Oh, and only if we can

get them in a dark zone or Oscar can figure his way into the Oak Park security system.”

“I’ve hacked in,” Oscar snaps back, like he’s offended that Vic would even question his ability to do so. “But it isn’t easy. I’d need time to cover my tracks after deleting any footage.”

“If I can get Maxwell alone for just a second ...” Callum breathes, shaking his head. “I could be careful; I could hide the body.”

“Even from the VGTF?” Victor sighs and scrubs both hands over his face. He’s not thinking about Maxwell though; he’s thinking about Ophelia. “I suppose, in the right circumstances, we could pull it off.”

“It’s about orchestrating those circumstances that’s a problem.” Oscar sits up as Aaron strokes his fingers across my belly, making me shiver with pleasure at the soft touch. “Manufacturing a scenario where we can get Maxwell and Ophelia away from the crowd and into a more private location, that’s the problem.”

We sit there in silence for a moment, and I swear, I can hear cogs and gears turning in Victor’s and Oscar’s heads. My own eyes scan the map as Hael sits up with a groan.

“We all know I ain’t the brains of these operations, so, let me do what I do best and pour us some drinks.”

“Scotch,” Victor and Oscar both say, almost in unison. That makes me smile, but I’m the only one. Everyone else is still frowning, still planning and plotting.

“What if we used Trinity?” I ask with a loose shrug of my shoulders. “Surely, we could convince her that it was in her best interest to get Maxwell and Ophelia alone?” I’m feeling pretty proud of myself until Oscar shakes his head once, slow and sharp.

“No,” he says, but in a contemplative way like he’s truly trying to see if my idea won’t work. His silver eyes shift over to mine. “If we tell her what we want and she in any way lets that slip to either party, we’re in trouble. Whatever fragile peace we’ve had for the last few months is guaranteed to break. That means, even if the VGTF round the pair up, they’ll be gunning for us from prison. Frankly, it’s better to just keep on playing the fake fiancée game.”

“She can’t feel very fondly toward Ophelia?” I retort, giving Hael’s knuckles a kiss as he hands me a glass of scotch before offering up drinks to

anyone else. Our gazes catch just before he turns away with a smile. I look back over at Vic and Oscar while Aaron scoots close against my left side, peering at the map. “I mean, don’t you think she’d want her gone, considering the blackmail and all?”

“We don’t know her feelings about her father.” Oscar’s mouth twitches at one corner, like he might actually be considering smiling about something. “If those feelings are anything like the ones she had for her brother, well ...” I snort, but I don’t think he’s actually implying that Trinity and Maxwell have an incestuous relationship. What he is saying, however, is that if Maxwell is coming to this school to watch a shitty graduation ceremony, then it’s possible he cares about his daughter. Maybe she cares about him, too. “It isn’t worth the risk. Besides,” and here his voice gets wry and thick with disdain, “I don’t exactly trust that conniving little cunt.”

“She looks at Vic like she wants to ride his dick,” Aaron adds, and I feel myself bristle with jealousy. For his part, my husband just quirks the corner of his lip in amusement.

“There’s always the possibility of a bathroom break,” Oscar muses, tilting his head briefly from side to side to stretch his neck, eyes closing for a moment. “Unlikely but possible.”

I sigh and rub at my temples a bit, determined to come up with a plan the way I did for Mason Miller. Because all I really want is to prove myself to Havoc, prove to my boys that I deserve to wear that crown and that I belong. If only I can see something they don’t ...

Hael passes out more scotch, and then we all drink until the sky is fully dark and our blood is warm and thick with alcohol. After nearly six hours of discussing strategy and studying the map, discussing risks and listening to Victor and Oscar bounce ideas off of each other, we give up and retire to the bedroom.

What we do in there, it’s not *quite* as magical and mysterious as what we did surrounded by candlelight. But there’s a lot of touching and fucking and it comes pretty goddamn close.

CHAPTER

T W E N T Y - F I V E

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Havoc—All of Them

Ten years earlier ...

The little girl with the ashy blond hair is dropped off at the curb by a woman in a salmon colored raincoat, her expensive shoes clacking across the debris strewn pavement as she digs her fingernails into the child's arm.

For her part, the girl looks unaffected by this subtle violence, her emerald eyes so bright that little Callum Park's pink mouth parts in surprise. His own eyes, a blue so perfect that sometimes the adults in his life get caught up in imagining that he could be a famous child actor or model or something, sparkle as the girl is dragged past him and up the front steps of a dilapidated building with asbestos issues and too much mold in the gym.

Callum turns back to his friends and finds that he isn't the only one in their little group to have noticed the new girl. His friends, Aaron Fadler and Hael Harbin, are both gaping after her. They turn to each other with excited smiles because it isn't often that a girl in such fancy clothes with such a wild looking frown shows up to torment them.

Cal is smiling and happy and excited because he wants to show this new girl how to dance. He loves teaching people that you can make art with your body, that when you dance, your very sad but sweet mother might just smile a little more than she frowns. He doesn't know that the woman is actually his grandmother, a woman who killed her husband and forced her daughter to help dispose of the body. Cal doesn't know that, right after he was born, his real mom tried to tell her story to the police and then his grandmother killed her, too. He doesn't know how much she desperately wanted a son because she's only ever had seven daughters, so she'll lie to him and pretend like he is hers. One day, Callum will look at Aaron looking at Bernadette and Bernadette looking at Aaron and decide there's no hope for him, so he may as well experiment with his dance partner. All the while, he'll be thinking of Bernadette anyway.

Skinny and quiet and small, Oscar Montauk also notices the new kid, but even though the sight of her excites his curiosity, he also knows that nobody dressed that fancy would ever go to this school for very long. He reaches up to touch his freshly dyed hair, as black as the night, as black as his friend

Victor Channing's hair.

Oscar is also not used to this strange and wild place in south Prescott; he attended a prestigious boarding school until recently, one that he already misses because it means being away from the dark and hateful eyes of his father. For now, the family fortune is locked away from Oscar's father by the hands of his own parent. His father will get it back, eventually, but it won't last. Then, half a decade after this moment, that same father will strangle his wife and kids, but he will fail to fully finish off the last child. Whether that's by accident or design, nobody will ever know, but the boy who he mistakenly thought was of his own seed will end up with his mother's dead arms wrapped around his neck. He will be pushed into a shallow hole, but luckily, he will not end up buried as he comes to, feeling sick and dizzy and disoriented.

He will see his father put a gun to his own head, too drunk and distraught to finish burying his murdered family, and he will watch as the man pulls the trigger. Oscar Montauk will grow up hating touch and hating people and scowling at everything, but he will also fall in love with the girl who comes striding out the front doors of the school like she owns the place.

Her green eyes scan the crowd, briefly pausing on their little group. Can she tell with that intense stare of hers that the five boys have found each other because they all sense something in each other that's rare in others: honesty. It draws them together like a moth to flames. Because even though later, almost ten years on, they will be bound by pain and by their intense love of the ashy-haired girl, that is not what binds them now.

Aaron lives at home with both parents, and even if his dad is a gambler and the occasional party-drug user, he doesn't dislike his life. They're poor and even though they live on the border of Fuller and Prescott, they know their son won't fit in at the bourgeois middle-class school, so they send him here. Still, for now, he's happy, and he will be even after he gets a little older and has to share his house with a baby sister. Even when his two-year-old cousin comes to live with him after her parents die in a car accident. He'll be happy until his dad dies and his mom leaves, and he has to let go of the ashy-haired girl's hand. Not forever, of course, but he will have to learn that when he takes it next, he's sharing her with the other four people in his life that he loves so deeply and perfectly that he would jump in front of a bullet for any one of them.

Aaron can't seem to resist reaching down to squeeze Hael Harbin's sweaty little hand. They both like new kids because new kids mean new opportunities. Hael is a bit nervous today because his father is acting weird, even weirder than usual, and last week, when he hit his mom—which wasn't anything new at all—blood spurted everywhere and then she laid on the ground and cried while his father grunted on top of her. Hael doesn't like that. The sight of all that pain and grunting makes him physically ill and he throws up a lot.

Still, when the ashy-haired girl comes down the steps and pauses in the courtyard, her eyes desperately flicking to the front gate as if she thinks she might take off down the sidewalk and escape this run-down nightmare forever, Hael can't help himself. He feels hope. He wants to make a new friend. Eventually, he'll fall so deeply in love with this girl that he'll take anyone he can to bed, just so he can close his eyes and for a few brief moments actually fantasize that she remembers his name.

Victor Channing is the strangest one of them all, and the one who—in this very moment—is the one with the most pain. His mother hits him across the mouth if he spills a drip of soda on his shirt or gets crumbs on his pants. She yanks him around the way this new girl's mother does, leaving them both with bloody crescents. Sometimes, his mom even takes him to fancy parties and parades him around like either a trophy or a cheap thrill for sale, he isn't sure. What he does know is that when she hands him off to his 'uncles', bad things happen, things that make him crouch in his closet in the dark with his hands pressed over his ears and his sobs drowning out the darkness of his thoughts.

Victor—or as the other boys call him, Vic, because Victor is just too much work to say—finally catches the eye of the ashy-haired girl and something passes between them, something that can't be described or explained but which is sought after by every poet and every artist and every musician who has ever composed since the beginning of time.

They are the first to realize that soul mates exist, and that they embody that ideal. That Bernadette Savannah Blackbird is connected to each and every one of them, but that they're also connected to each other. Hael is connected to Aaron who's connected to Victor who's connected to Oscar who's connected to Callum, and Bernadette is connected to them all, the center of the circle, the beating heart where all the blood flows.

Bernadette stares back at Victor and tries to pretend like she doesn't see him staring at her like an endgame boss, the final line in a poem, or the epic last words of your favorite movie. She tosses her hair the way the snooty girls at her old school did, but while she can hair flip with the best of them, she isn't snooty. Actually, she's really sad, even with that other girl by her side, the one that none of the other boys noticed until just now. Because that other girl, she's practically a ghost, quiet and stone-faced because she's just met her stepfather and he, along with her mother, will orchestrate a sharp and violent end to her story.

Penelope Blackbird gazes over at her sister and then flicks her attention to the group of boys. Somehow, she knows as soon as she sees them that she won't be around forever and that her sister will need someone on her side if Pen can't be there to do it. She doesn't know why she thinks any of those things, but she releases her sister's hand and backs away, turning to a group of girls near the only nice tree in the front courtyard of the school which is all cement but which is also the only place for them to play.

Pen won't make it to find her happily ever after, not in this life, but she's the true protagonist of the story. Even with her voice silenced, she found someone to tell it. And, in her next incarnation, she is going to thrive. The universe demands it.

Bernie frowns at the boys as the wind picks up pieces of her pretty hair and tosses it around her face. She sweeps some of it back, still staring at Victor, and feeling her entire life funnel down into one single chokepoint, one that she only need cross before she can have her happily ever after here, now, today.

Bernadette blinks once, twice, three times.

And then wakes up.

The morning of my high school graduation, I wake up early, stretching out on the gigantic bed that I share with five deliciously awful boys and feeling like the whole world is about to crack open and spill beautiful things into my life.

Today is the day of the VGTF's raid.

I should be nervous as I crawl out of the gray satin sheets that Oscar is so obsessed with that he bought extra sets, just so we could outfit both beds with

them. Instead, as I stand in the kitchen barefoot, watching the coffee maker drip-drip-drip and breathing in the earthy caffeinated scent of cheap Prescott beans, I feel rejuvenated.

Excited.

One last chance, one more fight.

“Good morning,” Oscar purrs, padding into the kitchen in his bare inked feet and removing a half-dozen coffee mugs from the cabinet. I’m actually surprised at what a good caretaker he can be, when he chooses to use his powers for good instead of evil.

“Morning,” I say, my breath catching sharply as he steps up behind me, sliding his hands around me until his long fingers find my cunt through the soft cotton of my pajama pants. He teases me with a single finger, playing with the hard nub of my clit and running his tongue up the side of my neck. Touching me. Worshipping me. “Are you excited for today?”

Oscar makes a sound of what’s either complete approval or complete disapproval, nothing in-between, but also impossible to discern. He’s just like that, this tech-obsessed asshole with his iPad for a lover and his kinks and his mastery of knots.

Speaking of kinks, he very calmly and carefully curls his fingers around the front of my throat, continuing to stroke my cunt while he licks up the side of my neck and makes me shiver.

“Am I excited for today?” he repeats, and I can’t tell if his words are simply disdainful or if they’re also cracking with a failure to restrain himself. After a moment, he gives in and shoves my pants down to my knees. “I’m quite happy to be finished at this pompous school.”

That’s what Oscar says right before he drives into me, burying himself deep as I groan, bent over the counter next to the coffee maker. Our fucking is just that—fucking—and it’s short and hot and perfect, and so damn good at calming my nerves that I end up sitting in the living room, drinking my coffee, and smiling like the whole world is waiting with open arms.

One last chance, one more fight.

I keep repeating that to myself, because even if it feels like we’re close to ending this thing, we have to get through the day unscathed. Anything could go wrong here. Even with the VGTF and a supposedly peaceful raid, there are risks. There are always risks. There’s the risk of death—I could lose one or more of my boys. And there’s also the risk of Maxwell and Ophelia

escaping to fight another day.

So, as confident as I am in letting Sara Young handle this thing, as sure of it as I am, I also have to maintain my skepticism and play like we might lose.

“Good morning,” Aaron says, appearing with his hair all bed-mussed and adorable. He leans over me and gives me a lasting kiss on the mouth that has my heart pumping and my already sated pussy throbbing in response. Goddamn it, but I already admitted that I was a thirsty bitch, right?

“Morning,” I say as he sits down beside me and across from Oscar, watching as his friend lifts his coffee to his razor-sharp lips. “We should probably get the girls up if I’m going to do their hair.”

Ah, the girls. Since it was our last day of school yesterday, we let the girls stay the night. We were careful, as careful as we always are, but we’ll be even more careful still when we leave the apartment. Like I said, there are risks. There are always risks, and even Oscar can’t calculate every single one of them.

Aaron nods belatedly, yawning briefly before stretching his arms over his head.

“I’ll help you with that,” he offers, standing up and padding down the hallway in bare feet. I watch him go, hiding a smile of my own behind my coffee mug. The fact that the only person in my life that I have to invite to today’s ceremony is the Vice Principal of my old school should have me feeling bereft in some way. Like, I have no parents, no siblings but for Heather who will be participating in today’s festivities with her own class.

The thing is, it’s impossible to feel bereft when you have the Havoc Boys.

“Alright, ladies, it’s time to get up,” Aaron tells the girls, nestled together on an air mattress in what’s essentially Oscar’s office. And by office, I mean he has the desk, the chair, and the bookcase that came with the apartment and nothing else in there. None of us thought to decorate for such a short stay.

And after this ...

Well, the plan for tonight is to stay here one last time. Tomorrow, we’ll move our things back to Aaron’s place to stay with Marie who still refuses to get on a plane to Louisiana. Whether that’s because she loves her son too much to be parted from him or something else, I’m not sure. All I know is that Hael has spent every single day on the phone with her since we moved her out of their house in Four Corners.

She even came up to the school once, last week, for a parents’ luncheon

thing. Callum allowed his grandmother to come, and it was the first time I'd ever seen the woman with my own eyes. Unfortunately, Ophelia also showed up and so Victor was left at a table with her and Trinity and Samuel Jade while the rest of us orphans crowded at our own table.

Anyway, Victor's grandmother's house is now ours officially—although I'm pretty sure it was ours from the moment we had a bloodletting orgy inside of it—but the construction on that is going to take a while. Also, it can't start until we have the inheritance money.

Just five more months to go, I remind myself, but it still feels like a hell of a long time when everything about Ophelia and Maxwell and the GMP is so uncertain.

The raid today has to go off as planned or I don't know what the fuck else we're going to do.

"I'm tired," Heather whines as she storms past me with nine-year-old attitude that puts my seventeen-year-old one to shame. The bathroom door opens and slams shut, and then I hear the shower running.

Ashley ends up crawling onto the couch and laying her head in Oscar's lap.

He goes completely still for a moment, like he might bolt, like he might throw his coffee cup at the wall and take off running and never look back. Instead, he forces himself to calm down and rests his palm on the top of her head.

Aaron actually stumbles when he passes by the couch and sees what's going on. Oscar lifts his eyes up to his friend's and then holds out his coffee cup.

"If you wouldn't mind pouring me another," he says mildly, but there's a certain quality to his voice that promises this scene isn't as easy as it appears. Still, he plays the part admirably, remaining still until Ashley finally gets bored and sits up, leaving room for Kara to take the end spot on the same sofa.

Victor is the next one awake, pausing in the kitchen for a little brandy-laced coffee before stopping in front of the wall of windows and staring out at the campus the way he likes to do sometimes, usually when he thinks we're all asleep. More than once, I've caught him doing that, gazing contemplatively at a distant sky. Sometimes, I leave him alone to his thoughts, but other times, I come up and slide my arms around his waist. Occasionally, we even fuck against the glass.

“Anything new to report?” Vic asks after Hael and Callum drag their asses from the bedroom to join us.

“Nothing on my end,” Hael yawns as he digs through the fridge looking for a snack. There’s a formal breakfast in the cafeteria this morning with, like, student awards and speeches and shit, but none of us cares to attend that. Pomp and circumstance just isn’t our thing. “Eggs okay?” he asks, and there’s a scattered chorus of affirmative grunts.

“The VGTF are mobilizing vehicles. Our crew says the city is absolutely crawling with cops. It’s happening today. They’ve even got the helicopters on standby.” Oscar exchanges his coffee for his iPad as Ashley and Kara squabble over some online game they’re playing together. They hardly pay attention to us when we talk business.

“Good,” Vic grunts, but I can tell he’s still conflicted about it. About his mother possibly getting away with jailtime when what she really deserves is an early grave. Still, he’s a good sport about it, heading back into the bedroom to get dressed while Cal does stretches in the sunshine streaming in through the windows.

One odd perk of Callum attending school here is that ‘gym’ at Oak Valley Prep can mean many things. They aren’t limited to volleyball over a sagging net while wearing threadbare Prescott tanks. Instead, he’s been able to dance while he’s here and even if it hasn’t been as rewarding as teaching Prescott kids in that warehouse studio with the unreliable electricity, at least it’s something.

Once Heather gets out of the shower, I have her sit in front of me so I can work her hair into a fishtail braid. As I’m arranging it, I can’t help but think of Pam and how she called these types of braids fish-mouth braids.

My hands still for long enough that Heather huffs an annoyed sigh and turns to glare at me over her shoulder.

“Bernie,” she whines, and I sigh, resuming my task. The thing is, I haven’t told her that Pamela is dead. I don’t want to tell her. I don’t know *how* to tell her. The day after it happened, after we’d spent the night in the old house, and I saw Heather for the first time, my tongue knotted and my throat closed up and I felt like I might pass out if I had to shatter her perfect smile.

So, for now, she knows nothing about Pamela. If she ever thinks to Google her though, it could be bad news for both of us. I’m going to have to tell her the truth eventually, about Pam and Penelope, but today is not that day.

Today is my high school graduation.

It's momentous, considering all the things I had to go through to get here.

So, when the day comes to tell her, I'll know it. We'll sit together somewhere quiet, and I'll try my very best to explain away the unexplainable, and then we'll see how things go from there.

"Go get your uniform on," I tell her, because every student is expected to attend today's ceremony in uniform. Every grade is required to put on a performance of some sort, so Heather and Kara will be working on a play together while Ashley's class simultaneously sings and also signs—as in sign language—a song they've been practicing for the last few weeks.

Aaron tackles Ashley's hair while I do Kara's and I'm surprised to see that he isn't half-bad at it. She ends up with a nice, sleek high pony with little chestnut ringlets curled around her small ears. He even makes sure the girls are dressed properly, their shoes shined, while I get into my own uniform and yank my graduation gown over the top. It's a heather gray color, like our uniform jackets, with a sky-blue tassel on the cap.

It looks fucking ridiculous on me.

It looks even more ridiculous on Cal.

"What do you think?" he asks, and since he cringes as soon as he walks into the room to showcase his look, I can already tell how he feels about the hideous thing.

"Um, not my favorite outfit that's for sure," I say as he pauses beside me so we can both stare at ourselves in the mirror behind the bedroom door.

"It's surreal, isn't it?" he asks, his voice thick with the same sort of wonder that seems to permeate the air of the apartment. Everything seems so normal. Shit, everything *is* so normal, but there's an undercurrent to it of something else, a song that sounds an awful lot like finality, like change, like the sound of a doorway creaking open to reveal a new and strange world beyond its borders. "We made it."

"We made it," I agree, and then I curve my fingers through Cal's, and we get ready to head down to the amphitheater. On our way out the door, Oscar slips a length of silky red rope into my pocket with a look in his eyes that promises we'll be using it today.

"Your reward," he murmurs, gazing into my eyes with an almost terrifying level of obsession. Well, it might be terrifying for someone else, but it's nourishing to me. A shadow feeding shadows. "For surviving today."

I bet he had no idea how frighteningly literal that statement was going to become.

Even though the raid is happening today, and the school will soon be swarmed with agents from the Violent Gang Task Force, I don't care. Whether I get my diploma in hand and walk across that stage or not, it doesn't matter. I still did it, managed to pass enough of my classes with a C-minus to find my way here today.

Besides, I'd always expected to graduate from Prescott High and let's be honest: what's more Prescott, more southside, than a raid by FBI agents?

This brings everything together for us.

It might not be ending the way we'd wanted it to—with some brilliant coup against Maxwell and Ophelia—but it's ending. It's a reprieve of sorts. Five months left until we get Victor's money. Just five months. We can do that, can't we? Even if we have to flee the area temporarily—not an ideal situation but a possibility—we can last that long.

We can do this.

The boys check the hallway before ushering the girls into the elevator, and then we wait behind in the lobby while they file outside. We don't need anyone to see us together, not today. It might be the day of the raid, but it's also a day when Maxwell and Ophelia will be on campus and within striking distance.

After they leave, we wait an appropriate amount of time before following them at a distance, just to make sure they connect with their teachers and disappear into the hordes of identically-dressed children being shepherded down the hill toward the massive outdoor amphitheater where the graduation is taking place.

Frankly, I wouldn't bother going to the ceremony at all if it weren't for the raid. You don't have to attend to get your diploma, you know. But we show up as we're supposed to and I spot Trinity Jade glaring at me from the grassy area behind the stage, the way she always does.

Just as an extra fuck-you to her, I curl my arms around Victor's neck and press our robed bodies together, taking his mouth the way a queen should always take her king's. Possessively and without mercy. After a moment, I

have to stop and pry myself away because I can feel the thick length of his erection digging at me when our bodies rub together.

“Oh, come on, your majesty,” he teases, taking my hand and giving my wedding ring a lick. “We can sneak off for a quickie, can’t we?” Only he knows that we can’t because we have no idea when the raid is going to happen exactly or how things might go beforehand. The situation today is too edgy, too up in the air.

So, instead of sneaking off to screw like rabbits the way I wish we could, we allow our teachers to guide us out from behind the stage to the sound of polite clapping, and take our seats in wooden folding chairs decorated with bows and ribbons and fresh flowers.

“It looks like a wedding, not a graduation,” Aaron murmurs, but he takes his seat beside me anyway, and we settle in for what’s likely going to be a boring and uneventful series of performances ... until it just isn’t anymore.

No part of me thinks Sara Young will come with guns a’blazing into a school, so I’m guessing the raid is going to play out like one of the children’s onstage performances. Agents will come in, targets will be located, people will be arrested. Nobody expects a shootout—not even the boys. But we do, of course, have guns hidden in our cars, just in case.

Hot early summer sunshine falls across my face and I lift up a hand to shield my eyes as I glance back at the ascending seats behind us. They’re filled with women in designer gowns—I wish there were men in designer gowns, too, but Oak Valley is too stuffy and patriarchally repressed for anything as forward-thinking as that—and men in suits. It’s so ... banal, so expected, reeking of untamed wealth and profane sophistication. Just looking at those people bothers me so much that I turn back around.

Since Oak River begins with preschool, we’re forced to sit here and suffer through several earnest but heartless performances from the youngest children. Ashley is a joy to watch, if only because she has big floppy chestnut curls that make me think about Aaron. After her song is over, she files down to the grass in front of us to sit on blankets with the other kids her age.

Havoc never rests, so even as we’re sitting there and watching all of this, I notice the boys’ eyes scanning the crowd, checking the shadows, listening and waiting and wondering. Oscar keeps his phone on his lap, scrolling through texts from our crew.

During a particularly painful performance from the first graders, I turn

around once again to see if I can't spot Ophelia and Maxwell in the crowd. It takes me a few minutes—especially since I've only ever seen Maxwell Barrasso in photos—but then I spy them near the back row.

Ophelia is the one who catches my attention first. Likely, because she bears such a striking resemblance to her son that my eyes can pick her out, even in the midst of a well-dressed bourgeois crowd.

She's wearing a bright red dress, the color striking against her skin, but ominous, too. Like, who wears red satin to a graduation? Her dark hair is coiffed into a bun on the top of her head, a few oil-dark strands framing her face on either side. Beside her, a man that can only be Maxwell Barrasso sits, legs crossed, hands resting on his knee. He's got on a navy-blue suit that may or may not have pinstripes—I'm too far away to tell—that screams money and power. Add in the fancy watch, the large ring on his right hand, and the bespoke brogues on his feet and it isn't difficult to imagine that he's the head of a gang that makes Havoc look like small potatoes.

My gaze moves away from him, searching the crowd for more familiar faces. Hael's mom is supposed to be here along with Cal's grandma. The Peters—Oscar's foster family—are also supposed to be in attendance, along with Alyssa, the little girl we saved. Nobody is here for Aaron, but it doesn't matter because he has Kara and Ashley, me and Heather, and all the rest of the Havoc Boys.

As for myself ... it'd be impossible to miss someone like Breonna Keating, the only person in that gala who isn't wearing money like it's going out of style. Instead, I spot her because she's also the only figure there who's wearing an old t-shirt under an unbuttoned suit jacket. Still, she looks professional and worldly and so much worthier of the space she takes up than anybody else in that crowd.

I'm surprised at myself for how happy I am to see that she's actually come. I mean, when I texted her and asked, she enthusiastically agreed. I'm just so used to being disappointed by people—adults in particular—that I didn't really let myself believe it.

With a smile fixed firmly in place, I turn back around just in time to catch the beginning of Heather and Kara's play. It's a short piece based on *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, complete with costumes and music. Kara and Heather are both stagehands, so they're not actually *in* the performance which annoys the fuck out of me, but this school, like anywhere else, prioritizes

people based on money and influence and power. Oil Tycoon Girl's little sister is the lead, dressed in Dorothy's gingham dress.

As their performance is coming to a close, Trinity Jade excuses herself and heads across the green, up the stairs, and into the bathroom. The boys watch her as she goes, and we exchange looks. As if a second performance is happening in the audience behind us, Ophelia also rises in a perfectly coordinated move to slip into the restroom.

"The fuck are they up to?" Vic wonders, and I can tell as his gaze scans the audience that he's considering going up there to find out. Only, not two minutes later, Sara Young and John Constantine appear at the edge of the amphitheater, stealing two seats at the very end of the front row.

"This is certainly an unusual development," Oscar murmurs, but then a few minutes later, Trinity and Ophelia emerge from the bathroom. Ophelia takes her seat while Trinity rejoins us; Heather and Kara file offstage with their class to sit in front of us.

Everything seems to be progressing as it should. We sit there for two more hours, watching each grade give their presentation before the intermission is called and guests file up the steps to a light catered lunch, sitting under awnings and reclining in metal bistro chairs.

Our girls remain in the uniformed anonymity of their respective classes as they head back to the Oak River cafeteria for food. As far as what we do, well, we sit and wait and theorize on what Ophelia and Trinity might be up to or why Sara and Constantine are walking around like they're just another set of parents here to support their kid—or, really, most of the parents are here because they enjoy this delicate social dance of politicking and backstabbing and wealth flaunting.

Regardless, we finally get ourselves some plates and fan out in pairs to make our rounds. Cal and Hael visit their grandmother and mother respectively while Oscar and Aaron stop by the Peters' table. Victor and I decide to visit Ms. Keating before we bother with Ophelia.

That bitch can wait.

"You came," I say, sounding far more like a seventeen-year-old girl than I mean to.

Ms. Keating smiles, and I finally realize what her shirt says: *Abolish the Electoral College*. Aww, look, I'm not the only person who thinks politics aren't just something to be left at the door when they involve human rights

and dignities. Cute.

“I came,” she agrees, her hair twisted into small braids and decorated with tiny metal rings. “Bernadette, I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you here today. Didn’t I tell you that you’d make it?”

Vic grunts and digs his hands into the pockets of his robe, stepping away like he’s actually interested in the array of food on the nearby table. Really, he’s just giving me a minute which I appreciate.

“You did,” I agree, reluctantly, and with a bit of Prescott sass. “It wasn’t easy.”

“Nothing worth having ever is,” Ms. Keating agrees, echoing a similar thought I’ve had more than once in the past several months. I decide that if we really do make it to Vic’s inheritance, and she still wants to teach, we should bribe the local schoolboard to make Ms. Keating principal of Prescott High and give her a huge paygrade. We could do that, if we wanted. Havoc can do fucking anything. “And I appreciate you inviting me. I was sorry to hear about your mother.”

“I wasn’t,” I retort, and I don’t mean it to sound so bitter or so caustic, so I just sigh instead. “I hear you were sort of awesome during the shooting?” I make it into a question, but it isn’t really. When Sara Young told me about what Ms. Keating did, I believed it. I saw her stand up to Neil for me once. That took huge fucking ovaries, and I’ll forever be impressed.

“Not really,” she replies just as easily, downplaying her involvement. “But if you ever need someone to talk to about anything, you always have my number. Doesn’t matter if it’s tomorrow or in ten years, I’ll be here.”

“I appreciate that.” This time, my reply is much less sassy and when she offers me up a hug, I actually accept it.

“Now that, that was a fucking sight to see,” Vic murmurs as he takes my arm and we finally, begrudgingly, make our way over to Ophelia. Maxwell is nowhere to be seen, but I expected that. On our way up here, I noticed he was waiting outside, near the door that leads back down to the amphitheater. He didn’t even look at us as we passed by. Whether that’s because he didn’t recognize us, or he just didn’t care to acknowledge us, I have no idea.

“Victor,” Ophelia greets, giving him an air kiss on either cheek and then looking over at me like I’m the scum of the earth. Her dark eyes immediately latch onto the ring resting on my finger and her beautiful mouth tips slightly down at the corners. “I see the two of you are working diligently at

maintaining Trinity's impeccable standing in the community."

"As always," Vic agrees, leading with a sharp, tight smile of his own. "We wouldn't want to do anything scandalous, like allow other students to see us mid-fuck in the school gymnasium." One of Ophelia's perfect eyebrows twitches, but that's a lie. We never got caught mid-fuck in the gym, just once in the girls' locker room and even then, only by Trinity at the end of the school day.

"Well, just so long as you continue with your legal marriage to Trinity," Ophelia says in a voice with the distinctive undertone of a threat. "Just remember that Trinity and I are the only reasons Maxwell hasn't slaughtered each and every one of you." She taps her finger against the tip of Victor's nose as he scowls.

Ophelia moves away then in a swish of red satin, leaving me and Victor behind. I let out a long breath, but he's frowning already like something's wrong.

"You okay?" I ask, but he just shakes his head and takes off after his mother, watching her as she rejoins Maxwell outside the door and then heads back down the steps toward the amphitheater. They take their seats and Victor reluctantly pulls himself away, but not like he's fully at ease with any of this.

We gather the rest of the boys and rejoin the group of students headed back to the lawn. It's as we're heading into the rows of folding chairs that we first notice that something is wrong.

"Ophelia is no longer in her seat," Oscar grinds out, sounding frustrated by the change of plans. As we pause by our chairs and look up the towering row of steps to where Maxwell sits, we see him reach into his pocket and pull out a phone. He answers it and puts it to his ear. After a moment, he, too, stands up.

I look around for Sara and Constantine, but they're not there either.

"Ophelia was just fucking there," Vic growls right back, but not like he's angry at Oscar. No, he's clearly pissed off with himself. "In the two minutes it took us to get down here, she left?"

"Apparently." Oscar checks his phone as Aaron goes to do the same, frowning at the sound of it buzzing in his pocket. He drops those pretty green-gold eyes to his screen and then turns a shade of pale that I equate only to the faces of corpses. Bloodless. Empty. Terrified.

His eyes lift up to mine.

“What’s wrong?” Hael asks as Callum crowds close and reads the message from over Aaron’s shoulder. His pink mouth flattens into a frown and his blue eyes go dark with violence.

“It’s from Kara,” he says, and I know instantly that this is going to be bad. “It says *mare’s nest*.”

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CHAPTER

T W E N T Y - S I X

“Kara, honey, where are you?” Aaron asks as we leave the amphitheater via the side path that winds up toward the dorms. He keeps his voice remarkably calm as the call connects and he’s able to get her on the line. I feel relieved, but only for about half a second. “What do you mean took her?” he repeats, and my heart plummets.

On our way out, we found Ashley with her class, in the process of filing back to their seats on the lawn. Seeing as we’re likely to get into trouble right now, we took her hand and led her up the steps to where Ms. Keating was sitting. She didn’t pester us with questions when we asked if she could watch the girl, but in her eyes, I could see that she was worried.

As rightfully she should be.

Heather.

If someone has taken Heather or hurt Heather ... I refuse to let myself think about it, following Aaron with the other boys in tow. When he starts to run, we run with him.

We end up at the Oak River dormitory on the third floor, where the girls’ room is located. They have what the school calls a ‘family suite’, designed for up to four siblings to share provided they all attend the elementary school.

The door is open when we arrive and Kara is crouched inside of the wardrobe, shaking and crying. She throws herself into Aaron’s arms as soon as he opens the doors, twining her arms around his neck.

“Where is Heather?” he asks her, setting her on the edge of one of the beds and pushing her gently back so that he can look into her eyes. Aaron sweeps chestnut curls from his sister’s forehead and gives her a gentle shake. “Kara, talk to me.”

“She took her,” she repeats, sniffing and shaking her head. “We asked our teacher if we could come back to our room to get Heather a new tie since she spilled milk on hers at lunch.” My hands clench into fists at my sides as Hael rubs my back in comforting circles, trying to keep me calm the way I did for him at his parents’ house. *I’m going to flay that fucking teacher alive.* At the same time that thought crosses my mind, I know I can’t blame her. The campus is secure; it’s safe. There are security guards everywhere. Who would ever think something like this might happen on a sunny day like today?

“And then what?” Aaron encourages, crouching down and managing to keep himself calm as he presses his sister for information. “Who took Heather, Kara?”

She shakes her head at him again and rubs at her nose, glancing up at me like she’s ashamed of herself.

“When we heard someone trying to come in the room, Heather told me to hide,” Kara explains, and I feel my knees get so weak that I’m afraid I might collapse. Hael pulls me to him, my back to his front, and keeps me standing by banding his arms around my waist. *Why are you always trying to be the goddamn white knight, Heather?* I think desperately, but I only love my sister all the more for trying to be a hero. That’s just who she is, like Hael or Aaron. Desperate to be a good guy in a world populated by villains. “And then this lady came in and she talked to her and called her Heather instead of Hannah.”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Kara pauses and looks away, like she’s afraid to tell the rest of the story. Aaron very gently encourages her to turn back to us with his fingers on her chin.

“Heather told her she didn’t want to leave, so the lady hit her and grabbed her arm and she made her ...” Kara trails off as I feel my eyes sting with angry tears. There’s only one woman on this campus who would think to take my little sister.

Just one.

“What did she look like?” Aaron presses, stroking Kara’s hair as he waits

for an answer. “The woman who took Heather?”

Kara pauses for a moment and then points directly at Victor.

“Like Vic, except in a red dress.”

And then we’re all moving again. Oscar is on his phone, trying to pull up the security footage and cursing at how tightly guarded Oak Valley keeps its secrets. He and Cal start with a search of the immediate area while Aaron and Hael peel away from us to take Kara to Ms. Keating.

Vic and I head directly for the Student Parking Area where all the guest vehicles for today’s event have been left—including Maxwell and Ophelia’s. If she’s trying to get off campus, she’ll have to go there first.

On our way, we spot Trinity Jade striding down the path toward the girls’ dorm and disappearing inside. Vic and I exchange a look. We don’t need to communicate with words to know what the other is thinking.

I follow Trinity into the elevator just before it closes, Victor slipping in behind me.

She whips around and plasters herself against the mirrors as I slam my palms on the wall on either side of her head. I’m seething; I’m shaking; I cannot fucking breathe. *If I lose another sister, I’ll die. There won’t be anything left of me for the Havoc Boys to save. It’ll be over for me then. Over for us. Heather cannot die. She cannot be taken from me.*

“What did you say to Ophelia?” I snarl, because if she thinks I didn’t see them slip into the bathroom together, then she sorely underestimated the depths of my Havoc-induced magic. “What?!” When Trinity doesn’t answer right away, I slam my palms against the wall again.

Victor casually presses the emergency stop button. While the VGTF sneaks up on the school, executing their carefully planned raid, nobody is likely to check on us in here. We have at least a few minutes. And this elevator, it’s a motherfucking dark zone.

“I didn’t say anything to her,” Trinity purrs back at me, her genteel voice rife with smug superiority. Whatever she did, whatever she said, she thinks she’s gained some sort of advantage over us.

I backhand her then, careful not to leave a mark. Blood smears my knuckles anyway as I draw back and ask again.

“What. Did. You. Say?”

This is the last time that I’m going to ask.

Trinity smirks at me, but says nothing, testing the very limits of my

temper. But with Heather on the line, there is no holding back. There are no doubts. There are no worries about getting caught.

I haul back and hit Trinity as hard as I can in the stomach with a closed fist, making her wheeze and gasp as she doubles over. Shaking my hand out, I ready myself to do it again. It won't leave a mark, but it sure hurts like fucking hell.

When Trinity finally straightens up, panting heavily but still carrying that superior gleam in her eye, I punch her a second time and then grab the back of her neck while Vic watches, allowing me to carry out the interrogation. I can feel his godlike control wash over me as I wet my lips.

"You've made a huge mistake," I breathe, standing back up and pulling out the cluster of red rope that Oscar slipped into my pocket this morning. It's supposed to be for fun, but ... didn't he say something about a survival situation?

"What the fuck are you doing?" Trinity pants as Victor steps forward to assist me, holding Trinity still and arranging her limbs for me so that I can tie her up the way Oscar showed me. My knots are nowhere near as pretty as his and probably very difficult to undo, but I don't care if Trinity is uncomfortable or if she suffers or if this hurts.

Survival situation, remember?

Once Trinity is bound on the floor in a hogtie position with her legs spread wide, her graduation gown rucked up around her hips, and her panties showing, I steal her phone from her pocket.

"What is the code?" I ask, kneeling down beside her. She shakes her head at me, but I swipe at her screen anyway, a giddy, sadistic rush traveling through me when I see that face recognition access is an option. With Vic's help, I maneuver the phone in front of her as she thrashes until ... bingo. It's that easy to unlock. "Tell me what you told Ophelia or I'm going to text your father the truth about Maxwell Barrasso. Regardless of what you say to him after that, he'll always have that seed planted in his mind."

"Okay, fine!" Trinity snarls, finally losing her temper as she struggles against her bonds. "Untie me and I'll tell you."

"Tell me now or I text Samuel," I continue, thumb already typing out a simple message.

You're not my real dad; Maxwell Barrasso is.

I show that message to Trinity, but it doesn't seem to shake her confidence

at all. She just grits her teeth and looks away from me. She doesn't believe I'll give up this piece of intel against her. She thinks I actually care as much about the inheritance or the deal with Ophelia as I do my sister.

I add another few sentences.

I was having sex with my half-brother, James Barrasso. A teacher at the lodge caught us together in one of the rooms.

This time, when I show her, she finally seems to get how goddamn serious I am about this. Sure, it's a possibility that she could whine to Samuel and get him to believe that I stole her phone and tied her up just to fabricate these lies, but ... well, the stark look of fear on Trinity's face tells me her rich daddy is of a different persuasion.

"All I did was admit to Ophelia that the annulment and marriage were a lie. That's it."

I grab her by the hair and yank so hard that tears prick at the edges of the bitch's eyes.

"What. Else." I don't even phrase it as a question; it's a command. Because I know there's more. A quick glance up at Victor reconfirms my suspicions. He gives a slight nod and I turn back to Trinity, giving her hair another harsh tug. She whimpers and snuffles before answering, her dignity stripped completely away.

"She asked about a little girl, showed me a picture. I agreed that I'd seen that girl before. Once, I thought I saw you staring at her through the fence." Fuck. *Fuck, fuck, fuck!* I slam Trinity's face into the floor once and then stand up as she wails helplessly.

"We have to find Ophelia," I say, my jaw clenching tight as Vic checks his phone for messages from the other boys. There's nothing, not just yet. He represses the emergency stop button and then sends us back down to the first floor.

"We do," he agrees, his dark eyes hard and businesslike. Just behind that careful façade however, I can see something else, that blinding rage of his, the temper that he almost lost on the first day of school spilling out to taint the earth.

We hit the first floor as Trinity begs and begs for us to let her go. All Victor does, however, is kneel down beside her and give a tight, cocky smile.

"You are so awful, Trinity Jade," he says mildly, his voice so placid that it can only be the menacing calm before a great storm. "So awful that even with

the billions you might've inherited from Samuel Jade, you are not worth my time. Even with your money, you are *nothing*. You are so small that you are not even a fraction of the woman that my wife is."

Victor stands up as I hit send on the text message to Samuel, showing it to Trinity before I drop the phone on the floor near her face and she screams and screams and screams. On our way out of the elevator, I push the button for the topmost floor. Before we leave, I take my diploma from my pocket, unroll it, and use the spare tube of red lipstick I brought with me to the amphitheater to write *Out of Order, Use Stairs* on the back of it. Sliding a piece of chewing gum between my lips, I smack it a few times and then use it to stick my makeshift sign over the elevator's call button.

"Fuck you, bitch," I snarl before turning on my heel with my husband right beside me. "Let's go find your mother."

"Oh yes," Vic purrs, reaching up to rub at his chin. "Let's."

Hael calls us as we're leaving the girls' dorm; Victor picks up on the first ring.

"What's up?" he asks, and then nods at whatever Hael says on the other end of the line. "Yep, we're on our way to the Student Parking Area." He glances over at me as he hangs up. "We need to run." And so we do. We pound across campus together as I shrug out of my graduation gown and chuck it into the bushes; Victor does the same.

Once we hit the gravel area at the back of the school, we see Aaron using the Bronco to push cars out of the way, just so he can get to the exit without having the time to properly move the other vehicles.

Hael drives behind him in the Camaro with Oscar and Callum in the Eldorado.

As soon as Aaron gets free of the lot, he takes off while Hael pauses beside me and Vic.

"They're heading for the back gate," Hael calls out as Victor opens the door and we both climb in together. I'm practically sprawled on Vic's lap as Hael hits the gas and we take off, gravel flying out behind us as the wheels spin and we pick up speed. "Maxwell, Ophelia ... and Heather."

"Shit," I breathe, clenching my teeth tight. If Ophelia gets Heather out of

here and onto that private fucking helicopter they have parked at Maxwell's place, they could be gone in an instant, dropped at the private airstrip that Maxwell also owns. He could take my sister to another country and use her as leverage to get whatever it is he wants out of us.

He could kill her. Worse, he could ... But I can't think about that happening. I have to focus on the moment at hand.

"If they reach the gate, Maxwell's formal motorcade will be waiting," Vic says, scooting me aside so that he can dig under the seat. He removes a pistol and inserts a magazine, passing it over to me. From the driver's seat, Hael does the same, removing a weapon of his own. "We can't stop them if they get there; they'll send us to the underworld in a hail of gunfire."

"Roger that, boss," Hael murmurs, hitting the gas. As the Camaro speeds up, taking the curving, gravel road at a much faster speed than I'd normally be okay with, Victor dials up Aaron in the Bronco.

"Stop Maxwell's car before he gets too close to the gate."

Legally, Maxwell Barrasso cannot bring anymore than four of his private security members on campus with him—two guards for him and two for Ophelia. The rest are waiting just outside the gate where the VGTF are, as we speak, getting ready to descend.

If Maxwell gets to his motorcade too soon, only one of two things can happen: we die dripping with lead as Vic suggested, or he and Ophelia escape with my little sister tucked between them. Either one of those scenarios is unacceptable.

"On it," Aaron says, rocketing off down a side road that disappears into the woods. It's a service road for the groundskeepers, that much I do know from looking at the maps on Oscar's iPad. I also remember that the narrow, pothole-filled road curves around to cut off this gravel road before it reaches the gate.

"Come on, come on," I whisper as I hear Aaron's ragged breathing through the phone. Just ahead of us, I can see the pair of sleek black Maybach sedans. Maxwell, Ophelia, and Heather are likely in one while several of the guards are in the other as a decoy. We can't shoot at them, of course, because it isn't worth the risk of hitting my sister. Even if we shot the tires out, there's the risk of causing an accident that kills Heather along with everyone else.

"Almost there," Aaron breathes, and then I see it, the white and blue Bronco shooting out of the woods and hitting the small hump of dirt that

marks the end of the access road. The SUV flies into the air and crashes down in front of the two black sedans, cutting off their route and trapping them between the low stone walls that line either side of the main road for small stretches at a time.

They have no place to go but to use the same path Aaron's Bronco took, down the side road and toward the woods. They reverse and then take off, and we follow. But Aaron's bought us enough time to swing the Camaro in front of them.

The Eldorado blocks the road from behind.

Trapping them.

Doors open and men in suits appear, armed with assault rifles.

Heather is wrenched out of one of the doors, her arm gripped tightly in the hand of a large, white man that carries the same generic profile as his son, James. The frown on his face is legendary; his temper piqued as he shoves the barrel of a gun right up against the side of Heather's head, burying the metal in her temple as an involuntary growl slips past my red-painted lips.

"Move these fucking cars out of the way or I'll blow the little bitch's head off right here and now."

"Nah, I don't think so," Callum whispers, his voice carrying in the silent tension that stretches through the woods, broken up only by the slight ticking and cooling of the vehicles and the ragged pants of our breathing as we climb out behind the Camaro, using the car as a blockade.

My creepy nightmare boy is somehow perched on the trunk of the car. He moves like a shadow, knocking the gun away from my sister's head just in time to send Maxwell's first shot wild. Callum grapples with the man as a scream breaks from my throat.

"Run!" I shout, and Heather's little body twitches like it's been plugged into an electrical outlet. She takes off for the woods as gunfire rings out from the direction of the Eldorado and Oscar uses an assault rifle he got from the trunk to take careful, calculated shots at the men emerging from the cars. Their own weapons are raised and ready to use; they don't hesitate to fire back.

We're about to have an old-fashioned shoot-out.

My eyes follow Heather as she starts for the trees, but my greatest fears are almost immediately realized when Ophelia grabs her arm. Instead of yanking her back to the car, Ophelia continues into the woods, my sister dragging

along behind her.

I almost take off after them, but Victor stops me with a hand clamped onto my upper arm. His eyes meet mine, and I hear the very distinct ring of an order in his next words. My king is telling me what to do, my god, the leader of Havoc who has no problem sharing his throne or his boys with me.

“Do not leave this Camaro unless it’s on fire, do you understand me?” He shakes me once when I don’t answer right away, torn between listening to him and taking off after my sister. It’s dangerous though, to run that bit of green between the cover of the car and the trees. I’m good, but Victor is better; we both know it. He has the greatest chance of getting out of here without being gunned down. “Bernadette.”

“I hear you,” I choke out, even though it kills me, even though it makes me feel like I’m coming apart at the seams. Victor leans down to look into my eyes, searing this order into my brain like a brand. “Do. Not. Leave. For any reason. If things go south, you climb into the driver’s seat and you book it the fuck out of here. Promise me.”

I grind my teeth together, but all I can manage is a nod. Victor shoves his gun into my hand, like he’s damn near positive he won’t need it. Since I already have one, I take the magazine out, slip it into my blazer pocket, and toss Vic’s weapon on the ground by the Camaro’s rear tire—just in case. But at least I’ve got some more ammo on me now.

“Trust me to get your sister back,” Vic tells me, standing back up, his face darkening as he turns toward the woods. I swear, as he goes, I can see it: the darkness of his temper unraveling like a sea of thorny black roses, spilling out of him to dig their roots into the ground. After a few steps, Victor begins to run.

My breath catches as I watch him go, terrified that I’m going to see my soul mate gunned down while attempting to save the little sister that I love more than anything. He crosses the open, grass-covered space between the end of the Camaro and the start of the woods, just barely ducking into the shadows before bullets rain in his direction.

Turning back to the situation at hand, I scoot over to where Hael is kneeling beside the front tire. He reloads his weapon with ammo that he pulls from his pocket, turning and taking aim over the hood at our enemies.

Including Maxwell Barrasso who, unfortunately, is still alive, there are seven members of the GMP to contend with—four bodyguards, two drivers,

and one mob boss. The sound of sirens in the distance alerts us to the presence of the VGTF. Even now, they could be encountering Maxwell's waiting motorcade.

"You ready, Blackbird?" Hael asks, and I nod, taking aim with my own weapon and preparing for what's likely to be a bloody and ugly standoff. There are seven of them; five of us. Victor is after Ophelia and Heather, but I know better than to doubt my husband's skills, the ones he keeps so carefully guarded that I sometimes forget that *he* is the most dangerous member of Havoc. Not Oscar. Not even Callum. No, it's Vic motherfucking Channing.

Hands down.

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CHAPTER

T W E N T Y - S E V E N

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Victor Channing

I creep through the trees, listening for the distant crush of leaves or the snapping of a twig. Ophelia might be able to crawl through the woods on her belly like the snake she is, but Heather is little and makes more than one mistake as the two of them wind through the trees.

“Victor!” Ophelia calls out, finally picking up on the idea that someone’s been following her. And, of course, she just assumes that person is me. Smart. “Get your ass out here or I swear to god, I will take your whore’s sister down with me.”

Even as she threatens me, Ophelia acknowledges that she won’t make it out of these woods alive if she kills Heather. She knows it, and that’s why I’m not concerned when I step out of the trees and into her view.

The ground is mossy and rolling, filling the empty spaces between the trees. Ferns dot the landscape, heavy and dripping with dew as I step between them and pause near a fallen log covered in clusters of brown mushrooms.

It’s all very idyllic, a beautiful place to die.

It’s far nicer than anything Ophelia Mars deserves.

You let them touch me, I think as I stare at her from across the glen and the sunlight drops faint but noticeable kisses on the crowns of our heads. The light reveals all the beautiful shines and highlights of natural variation in Ophelia’s oil-black hair. *You let those men ruin me. Sometimes, you watched.*

Inside of me, a dark ember burns at my core, one that I’ve banked and smothered and quieted so many times that I’ve lost count. *Hold that temper back, Victor, save it. Wield it like a weapon.* I’ve said those words to myself so many times. So many, many times. I’ve warned Bernadette and I’ve warned Oscar; I’ve warned Hael and I’ve warned Aaron. I’ve even warned Callum.

Yet, none of them have done what I’ve done, carefully cultivated and tended to that rage until it’s like the nuclear core of a planet, dense and hot and full of seething, primal rage.

“I’m going to kill you today, Mother,” I tell Ophelia because, of all things, I’ve always tried to be a polite monster. The egg donor puts her gun to the little girl’s head, but she doesn’t pull the trigger. She’s as aware as I am that if she does, there is absolutely zero hope for her. I will shed the skin of my

human form and I will chase her through these woods like the animal she thinks I am, the animal that she crafted, the boy twisted into a monster of pain and violence.

Carefully, slowly, I start down the moss-covered slope in front of me.

“Back off, Victor,” Ophelia snaps, her beautiful lash extensions catching the light, holding onto drops of sunshine like the dew clings to the waving fronds of the ferns. I smile at her, my teeth as white and perfect as hers, gained through genetics and careful breeding instead of dentistry and orthodontics. “This is your last chance.”

“Did you ever love me?” I query, feeling my muscles throb and pulse with rage. “I mean, for even one, single second?”

Ophelia’s eyes flash strangely in the dark, and as I let go of all of that carefully coiled temper and rage, memory peeks in. So dark and awful that I can barely stand to look at it.

“Shh, son, it’s okay, it’s okay.” Ophelia strokes my hair back from my face as I cry, strokes it with long, white fingers tipped in perfect nails. She traces one of those nails down my nose before cupping my face and then turning my head toward hers.

The kiss she gives is inappropriate; her touches are agony. Her pain becomes my pain, forced through my body whether I like it or not.

I blink, slow and dark, and I wonder if, in this forest of shadows, she can see that I no longer have anything but malice and dark intent for her. Memories left long-buried surge to the surface as I finally, mercifully, release the last of my anger.

The sound of footsteps crashing through the forest draws my attention, and I turn just in time to see several of Maxwell Barrasso’s men heading in our direction. Likely, they’re trying to subvert the VGTF and get to their boss before the feds do.

That isn’t going to happen.

Heather screams as Ophelia turns and takes off, dragging the little girl with her while the men aim their weapons at me and take fire through the trees. Without a gun of my own—Bernie most certainly needs those rounds more than I do—I have to play the game a little differently than I would on a normal day.

But I’m not afraid.

My temper has finally come uncoiled, like a snake ready to strike. Ducking

behind the large trunk of a tree, I wait for the men to get a bit closer, and then I slip out like a shadow from the right side. The attacker closest to me takes a shot, but I'm already diving into his stomach and knocking him to his back. We go rolling down the small incline together as the shouts of the other men fill the woods all around us.

I have to get to Heather.

That's the thought that permeates most.

Heather.

Because she's the light in Bernadette's eyes, and I'd kill the world just to see a flicker of it. A shimmer. A glint. Heather is basically Bernie's daughter and as such, she's also mine.

Such a terrible word, isn't it? Mine. So possessive, so dark and deep. One person can never truly own another person. I know that. I'm smart enough to understand. And yet, the most primal parts of me call out for Havoc; they scream for me to twist those five souls around my fingers and yank on them.

I own Havoc.

It's with that knowledge burning inside of me, mixing with the broken dam of my rage, that I let myself go in ways that I never have before.

Once we hit the bottom of the incline, I tear the man's gun from his grip and fire once into his face. Just like that. There's blood everywhere, but it doesn't matter. I could be drenched in blood, swimming in it, and it wouldn't matter.

For weeks—no, more like *months*—I've been obsessively going over scenario after scenario in my head, trying to find some way to deal with Ophelia. Oh, and Maxwell. But he's a secondary concern and he always has been. My mother has a way of insinuating her way into people's lives; if we killed Maxwell and left her alive, she'd just find someone else to use, some other way to dig into me like a poisoned needle.

Rising to my feet, I swing the weapon around and fire at the other men approaching through the forest. Where just minutes ago, there were only three, now there are many. Too many.

Maxwell has called in his cavalry.

Without Mason or Russ or Will, he doesn't have the loyalty or the skill left in his men to take us with small numbers. He needs brute force. So, it appears that he's made a call and—even with the threat of the VGTF—his men have come.

I unload the first pistol I stole and then search through the dead man's pockets for additional ammo. Gunfire rains down on me and I'm forced to move, hiding myself behind another tree while nearly a dozen men clomp and thrash their way through the woods, moving as if the earth owes them something rather than the other way around.

That just ... pisses me off even more. I can't explain it. Maybe it's the wolf inside of me? That wild, primal nature that demands to be obeyed.

The next thing I do is climb that tree, shimmying up with powerful thighs and strong arms, just the way has Cal shown me on numerous occasions. *"There's always a way up, hidden footholds or handholds. You just have to be patient and search them out."*

I manage to make it up into the boughs of the tree just as two of my attackers come around the trunk. They're surprised to see me missing, but it isn't really in human nature to look up. I come down on them both, knocking one to his back while the other stumbles away and opens his mouth to shout for help.

My hand wraps his throat as I slam him into the tree trunk. I must look ridiculous, dressed in my prep school uniform, my graduation gown abandoned in a trash can on campus. The feral grin that takes over my face is wildly inappropriate, but I can't seem to help myself.

The second man is already climbing to his feet, but I use my free hand to steal the first man's pistol and then shoot his buddy in the throat. Slipping the gun into my pocket, I use the strength of my grip to finish off my attacker. There's no joy in it for me. I don't love being a wicked monster who does wicked things, but this is the world I live in, the one I was forced into.

I play by Prescott rules.

The body slumps to the ground, and I whip around the trunk of the tree, slamming my fist into the stomach of another man. The pistol in my pocket becomes my best friend as I shoot and duck, twist around trees and reemerge. Everything is seamless; everything flows.

When I run out of ammo, I drop my weapon and steal another. Because theft is an integral part of the ecosystem in south Prescott, and there is no surviving without it.

These men are nothing to me, just a haze that I have to wade through in order to accomplish my ultimate goals.

Rescue Heather.

Kill Ophelia.

Get back to Bernadette.

The forest floor runs red with blood by the time I start working my way back through the woods in the direction of the south gate. That's where Ophelia will be headed, that's where she'll go. Because she wants to get out of here, regardless of the cost—even if the cost is Maxwell and his merry band of assholes.

Checking the magazine on my latest stolen weapon, I see that I've only got three rounds left.

Fuck.

I'll have to be careful, creative even. But I'm used to working with scraps, so I don't let that get to me.

Since my mother is a much better scion, a much better blueblood, a much better apostle of greed, than she is a huntress, it isn't hard to follow her tracks. As soon as I see her, I drop down to my belly and slither like a fucking snake. The serpent that my mother trained me to be.

Ophelia doesn't see me coming, yanking Heather along behind her. When the girl protests and struggles too much for her liking, she turns and backhands her so hard that Heather falls on her ass. If I weren't already crawling forward to handle the situation, I might just break.

I can't stand seeing that. I just can't fucking stand it. And not only because I love Bernadette, but because I've grown to love Ashley and Kara and Heather, too. I like kids because kids don't fuck around the way adults do; they don't hurt people the way adults do. Maybe, too, I like kids because I never really got to be one.

Not me or any of my other beautifully tortured Havoc Boys—or my blood-drenched bride.

I'm going to give them all what they should've had all along: stability, security, trust, honesty, love. All of those things and more. More, more, more. *Mine, mine, mine.*

My mother holds the gun on Heather and orders her to stand up.

"If you upset me again—even one more time—I will shoot you in the leg. Do you understand what a gunshot feels like, Heather?" Heather is shaking her head and sobbing now, her bravery stripped away somewhere between my leaving to fight off the encroaching GMP soldiers and now. None of that matters to Ophelia. There's only one person she ever cared about and that's

herself. She claimed to love me, in some, sick, twisted, perverted way. But it was never real. I know what real love feels and looks like. “A gunshot is like hot fire, like wicked teeth. It burns and it aches, and you’ll never be able to forget the bite.”

I’ve finally reached the fallen log, a big one, covered in a blanket of moss and more of those strange brown mushrooms. If I didn’t know any better, I might think we’d just stumbled into another world. A world of dark faeries and puckish demons.

“Now, come along.” Ophelia lowers the gun just as several men appear in the trees ahead of her. She seems a bit surprised that they’re there, but I’m not.

“Where’s Victor Channing?” one of them asks, but Ophelia just shakes her head and lets out a long, aristocratic sigh.

“I have no idea,” she drawls, gesturing randomly in the direction we started. We must be getting near the edge of Oak Valley Property, where that massive stone wall with its iron top sits, guarding the peasantry away from such a royal estate. If I were in a different situation, I’d scowl and spit. Instead, I watch. I wait. I cannot fuck this up.

Heather swipes blood from her lip and keeps her head down, letting out a small shout of surprise when one of the men grabs her by the arm.

“This is the little sister?” the same man asks while the other two scan the woods with shrewd, battle-hardened eyes.

“This is Bernadette Blackbird’s sister, yes,” Ophelia confirms, and even though she can’t see it, I can. I know what’s going to happen.

Without hesitation, the man lifts his gun to Heather’s head as she screams.

“What are you doing?” Ophelia bites out, alarm coloring her voice. “I need her.”

“And Maxwell needs retribution for James,” the man replies coolly, and those are the last words that ever leave his mouth.

Rising up from behind the tree, I take aim at the gunman’s head and fire. He drops like a boneless sack as Heather tears away from him and starts running. *Good girl.* Before the other two men can react, I’m shooting at them, too, and there’s blood running thick and hot across the mossy ground.

Ophelia, intelligent monster that she’s always been, snatches up one of the guns and takes off, ducking into the thicket of trees as I turn to go after Heather instead.

It doesn't matter: I'll catch Ophelia eventually anyway.

I dart after Heather, easily catching up to her as she stumbles and flees blindly through the trees. When I reach for her arm, she shrieks and spins at me with her fists and legs flailing, trying to fight, to escape, to be as brave as her sister.

"Shh, little girl," I whisper, cupping the side of her face with a big hand. As soon as she sees me, her small body collapses, and I gather her into my arms, holding her close as she weeps. "It's alright, Heather, I've got you. I've got you."

I stroke her back in small circles, even as I start walking again.

There's a lot of blood—some of it on Heather, most of it on me—but there isn't much to be done about it right now. So I don't try. I just pet and stroke and calm the child who, by my intense and indestructible bond to Bernadette, is now my daughter. *God help her future dates.* A small smile lights on my mouth, but it doesn't last long. Too much urgent business to deal with.

"Can you do something for me?" I ask, adjusting her so that we can look at each other while I talk.

"What?" she asks, face and voice hard like a certain someone I'm all too familiar with. A lesser child would be limp like a rag doll, passed out or broken, crying or screaming. But not this one. Not my child.

"If I put you somewhere and tell you to be very, very quiet, to plug your ears and close your eyes, can you do that for me?"

It takes Heather a moment to answer, but she finally nods, and we continue on toward the edge of the woods, where I can faintly see sunlight trickling into the darkness of the forest. I find a tree with a deep, hollow base and a cluster of verdant ferns around its trunk, and I nestle in the girl to wait.

As I'm pulling away, she stops me by throwing her arms around my neck and giving me a squeeze.

"Thank you for saving me," she whispers, and I give her a small kiss on the top of her head in return.

"You owe me no thanks for that," I reply honestly, standing up and turning to go.

"Vic?" Heather calls out, and I pause, glancing over my shoulder with a brow quirked. I'm sure I look insane, dressed in a jacket and tie and covered in blood, but Heather doesn't bat an eye at any of it. "I guess ... I ship you and Bernie now."

I have to blink a few times to truly process that.

“Or, well, I ship her and you and Aaron and ... everybody, I guess.”

Well, fuck me, I did not see that one coming.

“You’ll always be safe with me,” I tell her, and I mean it. “I’ll be back soon.”

She nods and nestles into the ferns as I take off running, finding the stone wall and then moving along it until I reach the gate.

Ophelia thought she was being clever, sticking to the shadows, slipping off her shoes, trying for a quiet, desperate sulk to reach this very destination.

But when she gets there, I’m waiting for her.

“Hello Mother,” I say as she makes a run for the gate from the edge of the woods. The gate is still open, and even if I can hear sirens in the distance, it doesn’t matter. They’re not going to arrive in time to offer her help of any sort.

“Victor,” Ophelia breathes, turning and then immediately lifting her weapon to shoot at me.

But it’s what I suspected.

I move back into the woods as she fires, using the trunks for cover as I make my way closer and closer, weaving in and out of the trees until my mother is pulling the trigger and no more shots are coming out. She drops the gun and turns on her heel, running for the gate, fleeing in that red satin dress that’s a blight against the green and brown of the natural landscape.

It only takes me a second to catch up to her.

Kicking out with my right leg, I knock Ophelia to her knees in the gravel road just outside the school. It leads back up toward the paved road that passes by the front entrance and then curves back into town, straight into Oak Park.

But here, right now, it’s just me and my mother.

She struggles to find her feet, the red satin gown twisting around her ankles as she gets up and keeps running. I just kick her again and watch dispassionately as she falls over, her hands bruised and bleeding now, flecked with tiny bits of gravel.

Eventually, Ophelia gets the idea and turns over so that she can look up and see me lording over her. There’s no pleasure in this for me, towering over the woman who gave birth to me. But with the flood of my anger came the pain of those old memories, her inappropriate touches and kisses, her

gifting of me to my ‘uncles’ at her fancy parties.

“All you had to do was care about me,” I tell her as she crab-walks backward, her dark hair falling out of her careful chignon and tangling around her face. I keep walking, just walking. Not running. Not menacing. Not threatening. My prey tries to drag itself away, and I just follow. I just talk. “The only thing you had to do to prevent this moment from happening was love your son more than yourself.”

“Vic, please,” Ophelia pleads, her voice so strained and different from the aristocratic drawl she’s always had, this lazy insouciance, this wicked entitlement. She’s said before that she knew I would kill her if given the chance. Well, chance meet circumstance. She really fucking crossed a line by touching Heather. “I’ve always loved you. You know that, right? I tried to show you—”

“No.” I gnash my teeth at her, and then I crouch down in front of her, meeting her stare dead-on. There’s fear in those eyes, a desperate sort of terror that she deserves but that I can’t bear to look at any longer than necessary. “You did not love me. You did not show me. You used me. You treated me like an accessory and a toy. I was for your pleasure, and the pleasure of your friends. Mother, you kidnapped Aaron. You tried to kill Bernadette. You won’t stop taking and taking and taking.”

“If you do this, you’ll never forgive yourself,” she says, watching as I reach toward her, for her. To end this. To finally fucking goddamn end this.

“If I *don’t* do this, I’ll never forgive myself,” I correct. “Because I’m a monster, and the only way I know how to deal with other monsters is to dance in shadows.”

And then it happens, and it’s over, and I’m back in the woods, scooping Heather into my arms.

That’s when the phone call from Hael comes in; that’s when I hear the howling.

CHAPTER

T W E N T Y - E I G H T

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Aaron Fadler

Ten minutes earlier ...

There are seven men, including Maxwell Barrasso, on the other side of this standoff. This shouldn't be so goddamn hard.

I end up on the upper part of the road, closer to the crossroads, with Oscar beside me. Callum slips back around the trunk of the car, shaking with adrenaline and panting hard. He stopped Maxwell from hurting Heather, but now we're in the middle of a shoot-out and our fucking leader has just disappeared into the woods.

"We either have time or we have ammo," Oscar remarks, reloading his weapon and taking aim at the men sheltering between the two black Maybach sedans.

"And that means, what, exactly?" Cal asks, shoving up to his feet and taking a position beside Oscar. I steady my hands, considering if I'm actually going to take the shot or not. We've already blown out the tires on the cars—and our enemies have retaliated in kind.

"Either we run out of ammunition or else the VGTF shows up," Oscar muses, and I can tell that even if waiting for the feds would be the easiest option for us, it's not the one he wants. He wants to make someone bleed.

"You mean ... either *they* run out of ammunition," Cal corrects, and I can taste it in his words, too. He also craves the violence. Not me. I'd so much rather just take the girls home and bundle them in blankets, hold them close, and only kill if needed to keep them safe.

Standing where I'm standing, with Hael and Bernadette all the way on the other side of the Camaro, I feel like killing is exactly what I have to do. When one of Maxwell's men leans out, aiming in the opposite direction and likely—and falsely—assuming that he's protected by the second car, I aim for the wide breadth of his back.

Deep breath.

Tense on the trigger.

A shot rips through the man's body and he slumps forward and then sideways, bleeding out into the grass. This is going to be an interesting scene to explain to the feds, but it is what it is at this point. They gave us no choice;

they took our *child*.

Not just once either.

They stole Heather ... they beat the baby out of my Bernadette.

I scoot out from behind the car, even as Oscar makes a sound of protest, and the movement draws another one of Maxwell's men out to take down what he assumes is an easy target. Oscar is able to shoot him through the forehead before anything happens to me, and I duck back behind the Eldorado's tire.

"A little warning next time, Fadler," he murmurs, but there's a dark smile on his lips that wasn't there before.

"Watch my back?" Cal asks, and then before either of us can answer, he takes off across the green. Gunshots ring out in his wake, but he's able to disappear into the woods without being hit. That's the thing, right? Fighting Havoc means fighting shadows. We're not usually about big-ass firefights.

"That fucker." Oscar's grumbling under his breath, waiting for his next opportunity to take a shot. From the opposite end of the road, Hael and Bernie are doing the same. I both hate and love that, seeing her in the trenches with us. It's where she was always meant to be, but also ... I'd rather she were safe. *Nantucket, Nantucket, Nantucket.*

What is Nantucket anyway? Some snooty seaside town with good scallops? A bunch of cute buildings and rich assholes and whaling and fishing and lighthouses? That would never have suited Bernadette. This does. I put away my overprotective streak so that I can concentrate.

Callum reemerges from the trees, once again drawing fire from Maxwell's men, and ending up on Bernie and Hael's side instead of ours. Smart.

"Go," Oscar tells me, his silver eyes sliding my way. "Join them."

I wet my lips briefly, and then I take off in the opposite direction. While the men are more focused on Callum, I clear most of the ground between me and the trees before they start shooting at me.

Panting for breath and carrying my gun in both hands, I move through the woods down the incline, waiting for Oscar to open fire on one of the black sedans. As soon as he does, I run as fast as I can until I'm sliding in the dirt behind the Camaro.

"Oh, a party up in here," Hael says with a big grin, firing his weapon several times before ducking back down behind his poor motherfucking car. I already wrecked it once which I had to apologize like a thousand times for,

but now this? Both the Eldorado and the Camaro are going to need a ton of work. Again. Poor Hael.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Bernie tells me, and I can’t fight the smile that rises unbidden to my lips. Taking my place beside her, I get ready to unload on Maxwell and his men, if only to give Oscar time to join us. It’s better when we’re together. Always better.

Only, it seems that Maxwell has a different idea in mind. He and his men take off, even with the threat of our bullets at their backs, and they charge the Eldorado where Oscar is now stationed by himself.

Cal and I are hopping over the Camaro at the same time, in a move that probably looks choreographed. It’s not that—even as much as Bernie might tease us about it sometimes—it’s just that we’ve known each other for years, grew in pain and poverty together, and now we’re just ... this. Dogs of war, crying Havoc, and gnashing teeth.

We move so quickly up the hill that Callum opts to grab onto one of the men rather than shoot him, knocking him down to the ground with Cal on his back. In a ruthless move, Cal whips his pistol out and fires once into the back of the downed man’s head before scrambling up after the others.

There are only three men left now. With Cal and Oscar together, that’s basically nothing. They could take down a dozen men. Two dozen, maybe.

Maxwell veers off from the group, and I take off after him, chasing him into the trees in the same direction as Ophelia and Heather. I don’t see them—Vic either—but I’m focused on one thing and one only: Maxwell Barrasso.

This is our chance.

If Vic can take Ophelia down—he will—and I can deal with Maxwell, then that’s it. Game over. Obviously, explaining what happened to the VGTF will be interesting but really, how can we be charged for any of this? Attacked on schoolgrounds by a notorious gang yet *again* and all with the plausible idea that it’s only about Victor’s inheritance and nothing else.

Adrenaline surges through me as I catch up with Maxwell and grab onto the back of his jacket, knocking him to his knees in the leaves. He’s good though, much better than that man I killed on the hill after I escaped the cabin. A man that, I know now, was probably a member of the GMP.

Maxwell spins so quickly that he’s able to kick the gun from my hand before I can stop him. His own weapon is long gone, and I wonder if he wasn’t running out of ammo back there in the first place.

Without a gun, this is going to be more difficult, but not impossible.

I throw my body onto Maxwell's, utilizing both gravity and weight as I wrestle him into the leaves. He throws a punch that manages to connect with my face, and stars flicker in my vision. Doesn't matter though. The well-dressed asshole beneath me hasn't been in the trenches recently. I'm not afraid of him.

Only, Maxwell is good.

Much better than I expected.

Like, he's Mason Miller good.

Fuck.

I know as soon as he manages to roll us over, somehow taking the advantage of gravity away from me. My fist manages to break between his arms as he struggles to hold me down, and my knuckles connect with his face. In retaliation, Maxwell backhands me so hard that blood fills my mouth.

"You took my son from me," he says, in such a smooth and even tone that I really start to worry here. "Do you really think I'm going to let a high school student wrestle me in the woods?"

His hands grip my wrists and shove them into the ground as he uses his knee to hit me in the groin so hard that the breath is knocked out of me. Blackness sweeps at the edges of my vision, but I take advantage of that single second when he's balancing on one knee atop me, and I roll.

Maxwell is knocked off as I scabble for the gun. My fingers wrap around the grip, but my opponent is right there, putting a knee on my back and hitting my wrist so hard that the weapon drops back to the ground. He reaches for it, and that simple movement puts him off-balance yet again.

I shove up to my feet, throwing Maxwell aside. It doesn't last; he's up on his own feet and lunging for the gun in less time than it takes me to steady myself.

We're standing on the edge of a sharp incline, where the woods sweep down toward the perimeter wall that surrounds the grounds of Oak Valley Prep. I just let myself fall backwards, even though it's a risky move.

With a grunt, I hit the ground and then I just start rolling. But my movements are quick enough and erratic enough that even when Maxwell takes a few shots at me, he doesn't find his target. Once I stop rolling, I'm so dizzy and breathless that I lose several precious seconds trying to suck in air. My entire body hurts now, throbbing and screaming as I shove back up to a

standing position.

Maxwell is already sliding down the incline toward me, the gun still in his hands. He aims for me and pulls the trigger; if the gun were still loaded, he might've actually hit me. Unfortunately for him, he's run out of ammo, so he simply chucks the weapon aside and comes at me anyway.

This time, as he's moving through the trees and I'm stumbling back looking for a branch or rock or anything that I can use as a weapon, Maxwell pulls a knife from an ankle sheath hidden beneath the finely pressed lines of his slacks.

Licking my lips, I think about Bernadette, about how beautiful her mouth is when she smiles at me, how kind her eyes are even when she tries to be a hard-ass. I think about how good it felt to take her at the same time as Victor, how tight and warm and perfect everything was. And I imagine living in that house with her, with them, with the girls. We could have it all. If only one of us doesn't die here today.

Because if somebody does, Bernadette will never be the same again. She will never recover. I know that because I lost her once, and even though it was a temporary state, something that could be rectified later on, I was devastated, broken, bitter. No, if one of us dies we might as well take her with us.

Maxwell's brown eyes are dark with violence as he moves toward me like a man who's used to wielding knives, used to drawing blood and hurting people.

See, if he'd had his whole army behind him, we would've lost.

If it were just me and him in these woods, then I might die. It's becoming quite clear that as good as I am, Maxwell Barrasso is better. Plus, we killed his son. He has a very personal vendetta against us that demands bloodshed to be satisfied.

But, as we explained to Mason Miller, wolves have packs.

A gunshot goes off and Maxwell lets out a violent shout of pain, collapsing to his knees in the leaves as blood blooms on his thigh, staining his navy slacks an even darker color and turning the faint pinstripes red.

"What do we have here?" Cal muses, coming out of the woods with the pistol held up by his shoulder. He even itches the bright yellow blond of his hair with the grip, as if everything about this moment is calculated and casual and planned. Really, this is just Havoc in a nutshell. This is what we do.

Panting, I use the trunk of a tree to catch my breath while Cal gets close enough to Maxwell that the man actually tries to swing that knife of his. Callum just shoots him in the hand and the man screams. It's fitting, a mimicry of what we did to his second-in-command. Only, I was the bait this time instead of Bernadette.

"You okay, Aaron?" Cal asks, and I nod, watching as Callum crouches down beside Maxwell. "You could've left things well-enough alone. You could've left our territory. You could've resisted the temptation to rape and pillage our school. And now, today, here, you could've resisted the urge to plunder that child. Everything you have done, Maxwell Barrasso, is what led you here today."

Maxwell spits in Callum's face, but it doesn't faze him. Callum just swipes a hand over his cheek to wipe it off.

"Prescott trash," Maxwell bites out, scowling and panting. He must know he's going to die, but he doesn't show fear or pain. Just hate and rage and frustration. Something about his expression, his demeanor, reminds me of Neil Pence. What was it that Cal said then? *They always break, eventually.* "If you kill me, my people will never stop hunting you. There won't be a moment of peace in your lives. Not a single second of it."

"Mm, I find that hard to believe," Cal retorts, and then he stands up as Oscar steps out of the trees with a bit of rope in hand. He slips it around Maxwell's neck, puts a foot between his shoulder blades, and then pulls.

The man scrambles to claw the rope from his neck, thrashing and fighting beneath the easy strength of Oscar's grip.

"Ah, there it is again," Cal remarks, just like he did when Neil finally began to scream inside the pretty coffin we picked out for him. "He just broke, too."

I lean my back against the tree, panting and hurting, but relatively unharmed.

Oscar finishes his work and then lets Maxwell go, watching as the man slumps face-first into the leaves.

And that's when our phones vibrate in unison and Oscar whips his out faster than Cal or I do. He answers the call with a sharp "*what?*" and then goes completely still.

That's when we hear the howling, that's when Callum starts to run and Oscar moves over to help me so that I can run, too.

“What was it?” I ask, glancing down and seeing that the call on his phone is still connected: it’s Hael.

“Mare’s nest,” Oscar breathes as panic surges through me, and I find myself facing the almost unthinkable reality of losing one of my girls for the second time that day.

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CHAPTER

T W E N T Y - N I N E

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Bernadette Blackbird

Ten minutes earlier ... again.

Callum and Aaron hop over the front of the Camaro and take off, chasing the men that are now racing up the hill toward Oscar and the Eldorado. Likely, they're going for the road in an attempt to escape. Either they don't have a lot of ammo left or the distant sound of sirens has sparked their movements.

Regardless, Cal attacks one of the men from behind while Aaron peels off and heads into the woods after Maxwell. I'm about to go after him when Hael's hand snaps out and grabs me by the wrist.

"No," he says, giving me a sharp look. "Vic's orders. You stay here." He releases me and then takes aim up the hill, firing off several more shots and then cursing when he realizes the remaining GMP members are now out of range. Hael drops his gun to his side and steps back, unwilling to leave me here alone.

But, like, there's no way I'm just going to sit around when my boys are in trouble. I'm backing up and considering the possibility of escaping Hael to go after Aaron when movement in the trees on the opposite side of the road draws my attention.

Time seems to slow down in such a way that I notice every little detail, like the striations in Hael's beautiful eyes as he starts to turn toward the rustling sound. I see what's happening first, as Martin Harbin stumbles out of the woods, his brown eyes bloodshot and his hair mussed. He is a man unhinged and broken in unfixable ways.

His wife, Marie, is clutched against his side, bleeding and bruised, with her husband's hand clamped prohibitively over her mouth. Her eyes—such a sweet and gentle reminder of Hael's—are wide with fear and terror.

I see the tattoo on Martin's right arm, the red one that looks like the silhouetted face of a clown. It occurs to me then, in that split-second of time, that he's been in prison for years. That, sometimes, when people go to prison, they join gangs.

Martin Harbin is white and awful; the Grand Murder Party is a white supremacist gang made up of awful, awful people.

It's a match.

And we took his wife from him. We humiliated him. We walked away and left him all alone because it was the safest thing to do, the smartest thing to do.

He's lifting up a weapon and pointing it at Hael like his son is the only thing left in the known universe, and then his finger is tensing on the trigger, and even though I know Victor would tell me to stand down, I don't.

I'm already moving before I can even consider the consequences. Because there is no consequence greater than losing one of my boys, of seeing them hurt and bleeding and dying. That's something that my soul can't bear. So, regardless of what my actions mean, I take them because there's no alternative for me.

I'm sprinting forward now, running so fast that the air seems to stream past me like water, flowing across my cheeks and tangling in my hair. If there was more time, I could probably shoot Martin while still being careful not to hit Marie, attached to his side and wrapped in his arm as she is. But that's not how life works.

You can plan and estimate and figure and calculate all you want, but sometimes random events occur that can change the trajectory of the entire world. This is one of those things.

Martin is Hael's father, so he was able to get a pass to come on campus today. Also, he's in the GMP, so he knows about Havoc and all the things we do and the vendetta with his boss. He's angry and he's desperate and he's violent, and so when he pulls the trigger to shoot his son, I'm right there in the path of that bullet like I was born to stand in that one place, to fall into line even as Hael lets out a roar of rage, even as he tries with valiant effort to fire his own gun at his father in a preemptive strike.

The thing is, it's too late.

The sound of Martin's gun going off is like a car backfiring, but the pain ... the pain is indescribable. It's like being impaled by a hot iron, one that sears and cooks the flesh as it goes in. I'm still standing, adrenaline flooding me and keeping me on my feet for a moment as Hael's muscled body explodes into violent action.

There's another gunshot and another and another. It feels like those shots, this pain, are occurring over hours, like time is passing slow and sticky like molasses. In reality, I'm pretty sure Martin's shots are continuous and near instantaneous, so quick that Hael unloads his own gun into his father before

charging the man's sagging form and managing to tackle him before he even hits the ground.

In a fit of dark rage and tumultuous despair, Hael whips out the hunting knife from his ankle sheath—similar to the one Maxwell Barrasso is wearing, though I don't know that at the time. All I know is that everything comes full circle, everything recycles, everything repeats and patterns and mimics. And even though I can't see it, I think of that scar on Hael's arm, the one that stretches from shoulder to fingertip.

The one that his father gave him.

So it seems appropriate that Hael would take that knife and that he would plunge it straight down into his father's chest. There's so much blood; it looks like Hael is being bathed in it. He stabs his dad again. Again. Again. As many times as Martin shot me, that's how many times Hael stabs him.

Oh, he finally got him, I think, and that's when I realize that something is really and truly wrong. That's when I look down and I see all the blood, and I think briefly about that blood running down my thighs. I think of it running when I was on my period and Oscar fucked me. I think about it running when I had the miscarriage and the boys crowded around me in the bathroom. I think about the blood at the high school and the crown on my head and the time when Kali stabbed me. *Every significant moment in my life is slathered in blood. Drenched. Soaked. Consumed by it.*

I'm supposed to be running now, but I'm not. I've stopped moving even though I'm still telling my body to run, and it's frustrating as fuck because I can't get close to Hael to throw my arms around him, to bring him close and hold him tight.

There's a lot of blood when I fall, when my knees hit the floor and it's so red and everything is wet ... My breath comes in strange, gasping chokes as I fall forward, palms hitting the ground. But my elbows won't hold me up, and I end up collapsing, face-first. I have *just* enough energy to turn my face to the side, so that I can see Hael. *Mine. Always mine. My Havoc Boys.*

His mother is crawling over to me now, weeping and shaking and murmuring in French. She continues to whisper to me as she turns me onto my back, drawing my head into her lap.

"It's okay," she chokes out, her voice heavily accented. She soon slips back into French, saying beautiful things that I can't understand as she swipes my hair back from my forehead. I'm coughing now and everything is

spinning.

This is how it was supposed to happen. Havoc was always for me. But I was always for Havoc.

“C’mere, Blackbird, c’mere,” Hael is murmuring as he takes me from his mother, his voice breaking as he digs his phone from his pocket with hands dressed in blood. He presses dial and then lifts the phone up to his face. “Come on, come on, answer, damn it ...” Hael trails off with a curse, his voice breaking on a rough sob as he murmurs, “*mare’s nest*” into the phone and then tosses it aside.

I’m vaguely aware of him cupping his hands around his mouth and letting out a piercing howl that slices right through the woods and cuts into the rest of the boys like a knife. A part of me is certain that I can feel them all turning back to look at us, beginning to move, their footsteps heavy and loud on the forest floor.

I must pass out because the next thing I know, I’m surrounded by Havoc and something hurts. It’s the pain that really and truly wakes me up, a violent, wrenching, awful sort of pain that feels endless and all-encompassing, as if I have no choice but to give into it.

Instead of five masculine faces, shaped by time and violence and pain, decadently handsome, perfectly wicked ... I see the faces of five sweet boys across the length of a playground. My clothes are too nice for this part of town, and my breathing is shallow because I’m so scared. I’m not sure what they first thought when they all turned and saw me, dressed in designer clothes and quivering.

What must I have looked like? How must I have sounded?

“Bernie!” Victor’s voice is a strange, broken shattered thing. He presses both hands against the wound in my chest, and I cough, spattering Callum’s face with blood. “Damn it.” After a moment, he adjusts himself, digging two fingers into the wound near my heart. “What artery am I trying to pinch off?” he snaps at someone. Hael, I think.

You’re hurting me, is what I try to say, but I can’t seem to make any sound come past my lips. I painted them with a special color today. It’s called *Victory* but it only tastes like blood. And regret. And goodbyes.

“We need an ambulance,” Aaron is choking out, his phone pressed to his ear as he places his hand over Victor’s, like he just can’t bear not reaching out to help. My eyes find Callum’s, and I see that the blue of them is different

somehow. *Wet*. He has tears. There are tears in his eyes. *He's crying*.

He knows.

He fucking *knows*.

"You were supposed to follow orders," Oscar says, so detached he may as well be floating a million miles away. He leans over and puts his forehead against mine. He's shaking, too, I think. It's hard to tell because everything is getting blurry.

"Blackbird." It's Hael's warm voice, but he doesn't sound like he's smiling. Something is wrong. I just want him to smile. I turn my head slightly to one side, but I can't seem to focus on him. His brown eyes waver in front of me as I try and fail to lift my hand toward him.

"Bernie," a small voice whimpers, rife with sniffles. I'm barely able to register that it's Heather calling out to me. Heather, who is safe. *Heather*. My last remaining sister. My world. My heart.

Warm and soft. I let my heavy lids close as memories sweep over me. Aaron's shy smile as he gave me a fresh pack of crayons, one where all the tips were sharp and unused, when all his other crayons were broken and dull. Callum when he invited me to dance and made me forget that I was supposed to be crying over my dead dad. Hael as he let me try out his bike, holding it up and pushing me along even after I'd already fallen and scratched it. Oscar using dull children's scissors to make me a dress made up of a thousand pieces of paper. Victor shoving a kid down the slide for pulling my pigtails.

I cough one more time and then sweet, beautiful light sweeps in around me.

I'm not afraid anymore.

I'm queen of Havoc.

My being dead doesn't change that.

And ending things like this? It's how it's always supposed to have been.

Without me to protect, there doesn't need to be a Havoc.

The last thought that I have before I die is this: *I set you free, boys. I set you fucking free.*

CHAPTER

THIRTY

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Aaron Fadler

There have been times where I've regretted the things I've done. Was I too harsh? Did I cross too many lines? Never did I regret Bernadette Blackbird.

I'm sitting on the floor of the hospital with an arm banded around my knees, eyes closed, mouth pressed into the bloody leg of my jeans. I feel so ridiculously seventeen in that moment, like my birthday will never come, like I'll be trapped forever in the unending halls of Prescott High, searching for dark zones and quelling rebellions.

"She was dead," Callum whispers, his voice the most ragged I've ever heard it. It cracks and shatters with each word, like broken glass digging into my eardrums. It takes an extreme physical effort to keep my hands away from my ears. In fact, I want to dig my fingers into them until my eardrums are too damaged to hear whatever words the doctor might utter.

Time of death ...

Death.

Bernadette, dead? When we were supposed to protect her? How? Why? I don't understand any of it.

"She isn't dead yet," Oscar snaps, looking over at his friend like he might very well kill him. I can hardly look at them. Instead, I'm struggling to tear my attention away from Vic. I've never seen him look the way he does now, twirling his ring around his finger. With Bernadette gone, he'll go home and put a bullet in his head.

I hate him for that because I know I don't have that luxury. Heather needs someone to take care of her. Kara and Ashley need me. I close my eyes until I feel a warm hand on my shoulder. Lifting my head up, I find Hael with a Styrofoam cup in his other hand. He offers it to me.

"Coffee," he says. He tries to smile, but it's the biggest bunch of bullshit I've ever seen. I think, if Bernie dies here tonight, that he'll go on. But he'll never be the same. Maybe, one day, ten years from now, he'll marry a nice woman, but she'll always catch him staring off into the sunset thinking about a girl who isn't her. Then, one day, she'll wake up and he'll just be gone.

That's Hael Harbin for ya.

"No thank you," I manage to get out, forcing myself to stand up. I'm unsteady on my feet, but even with the wobbling and disorientation, I can't

miss the image of Police Girl making her way down the hall toward us. She looks appropriately sad for the situation. Maybe not all cops are bad after all?

“I’m so sorry to hear about Bernadette,” she says, and I see Oscar scowl so violently that Sara’s hand strays near the butt of the gun on her hip. She looks at him, but he just turns away to stare at the wall. Imagining Oscar without Bernadette is like imagining a grenade without a pin. He won’t last very long until he does something he regrets so deeply that he breaks. Cal ... I can’t really look at Cal. He’ll either explode or implode, not sure which.

I bite my lip and rake my fingers through my hair.

“What the fuck do you want?” I ask, because Vic doesn’t function without Bernadette. I function because I have no other choice. Being a parent means you push on when all you want to do is curl up and die. And now I’m a parent to three girls. I’d always assumed Havoc would raise them with me, but ... I don’t know anything anymore.

“Maxwell Barrasso is dead,” Sara tells me, and I nod. We know that, obviously. She glances briefly over at Hael, but he may as well be carved of stone. There’s a faint smile lingering on his lips, but it’s tainted with melancholy and colored with confusion. He isn’t sure what he should be doing right now. Because if we’re not protecting Bernadette, and we failed to protect Bernadette, then who the actual fuck are we? What the fuck is Havoc? “Anyway,” she continues, exhaling sharply. “I’m here to tell you that you’re all free to go.”

“Free to go?” I ask, and she gives me a smile that’s far too melancholic to be comforting. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I have all the information I need currently. Once you’re done here, you can ... go home.” Sara tucks her hands into the pockets of her blue jacket. I just stare back at her because there are no words that I could say that would encompass my emotions right now.

I’m falling so fast and so hard that no matter where I land, my bones are likely to break. Shatter. Turn to dust. My knees feel weak, but Hael catches my elbow before I can collapse to the floor like the fool in love that I am.

Even though I know it isn’t true, I always wanted to believe that true love was stronger than anything else. That, if you had it, you could do anything. You had everything. I’m not sure what I believe anymore.

“That isn’t to say that I won’t have more questions later,” Sara says with a sigh. “But for now, we’re not charging your ... family with anything.” She

pauses again and then reaches out with a manila envelope. "If Bernadette somehow pulls through, give her this."

Sara steps back and turns away, heading down the sterile hallway in the direction of the exit.

I watch her go and then look down, reaching inside the folder to see what Sara left in it.

It's a page from a journal with thin pink lines and the faintest image of a rose in the background. The handwriting is looping and familiar. Penelope. I would recognize it anywhere. That same day, when Bernadette showed up at the playground and was instantly hated by everyone in it, Penelope was loved. I don't think, at the time, she knew how to help her sister. By that time, she was already struggling with so much.

If only we'd had her back the way we had Bernadette's.

I blink through what I think are tears, but I don't give a shit what anyone else thinks.

"Shit," Hael breathes as he reads the page ahead of me. "Bernie needs to see this."

Dear Bernadette,

Sometimes I'm not good at saying all the things I need to say. So ... I'm going to write it down here and maybe one day, I'll feel brave enough to tell you.

Things have not been good for me for a long, long time. When I close my eyes at night, there are more nightmares than dreams now. It wasn't always like that. Before Dad died, things were better. But now ... You know that Dad's mom lives in Nantucket, right? Well, she's agreed to take me in.

I should've left a long time ago, but I wasn't sure if Pamela or Neil would let me go. I'm afraid of them both, but I'm too afraid to stay, too. So, I'm leaving. I want you to come with me, but I know you won't leave Heather. She can't go with us because Neil will never let her go. They'll come after us; they might even put us in another foster home like the Kushner's.

I'm not sure if I could handle another place like that.

I'm leaving, even if that means I'm a coward. I have to. If I don't, I'm pretty sure I'll die here long before they kill me. Maybe I already am dead? Either way, I've known for a long time that I wasn't going to be around to protect you.

That's okay though because I know you can protect yourself. And I know

that if you just reach out and ask, those boys will protect you, too. All you have to do is ask, Bernie. Call Havoc. Just say it. That one word. Utter it. Then I'll be gone and safe, and you'll have an army to fight for you and Heather.

Just know that I love you to the moon and stars and back. I always have. I always will.

No matter what.

XoXo

Penelope

I drop the letter to my side, offering it up when Callum moves over and takes it from me. He shows it to Oscar before handing it off to Vic. Once we've all read it, Victor hands it back to me and I slip the page into the envelope. *Bernie, please*, I think, praying harder than I've ever prayed. I'm not religious, but I still do it because I don't know what else to do.

We've done everything we could to keep her safe. Somehow, we failed. Somehow, in the end, it didn't matter because she was willing to sacrifice herself to save any one of us. Hael blames himself, but it wouldn't have mattered who it was because Bernadette knew what she wanted—or maybe even felt she *needed*—to do.

The pair of swinging doors opposite the waiting area open, and the surgeon we met with earlier walks out. She pulls her mask down, and I swear that I can tell everything that's happened based on the expression on her face.

Please no. Please, please, please. Dark god or goddess or benevolent universal energy, please don't take my first and only love from me. Please. We'll all break. Havoc will cease to exist. It'll be the end of everything good and true in our lives.

"Victor Channing?" she calls out, because Victor is Bernadette's legal husband. That'll kill me if that's how we end it all, with his ring on her finger and the rest of us waiting with bated breath. I want her to know that she doesn't have to choose, that she never has to choose. Because we're blood in, blood out. Havoc. Forever. Always.

Vic stands up from the chair, the wood creaking as he lifts his heavy body. I don't turn back to look at him, waiting for the rubber squeak of his boots against the linoleum. He pauses beside me, on my right. Hael is on my left. Oscar and Callum wait behind us.

"I'm Vic Channing," is all he manages to get out. His hands are shaking by

his sides. The unshakeable Victor Channing. He's trembling so badly that I wonder if he doesn't need medical attention. My eyes slide closed, and I struggle to breathe.

If Bernadette is dead ...

Then Havoc is dead.

The letter of her name might not be in the acronym, but she *is* Havoc. She always has been. We live and die by the cadence of her breath. We exist as rhythm and pulse to her heartbeat.

"Mr. Channing ..." the surgeon begins.

Tick, tock.

I can hear the old-fashioned clock on the wall.

It swallows up the words that follow, and I tumble into an emotional rabbit hole.

Down, down, down, and even deeper still until I was down too deep to swim, and the water filled my lungs, and then ... I had my epiphany.

Two months later ...

Getting three little girls dressed for a birthday party is a skill I never imagined I'd have in my wheelhouse.

"My hair looks weird," Heather tells me, standing in front of a mirror with a fine pink mist covering her slicked-back brunette hair. "In a good way. I like it." She turns around to grin at me as I plant my hands on my hips and smile down at her.

Not bad for an eighteen-year-old guy, huh?

"I do my fucking best," I say, shaking my head as I glance over at Kara. She's stacking bracelets on her left arm, a rainbow of rubber ones that she's collected from various school events and charity donations. Anytime she sees an offering near a checkout counter, she makes me donate the dollar or whatever so she can get one. Or so she says. Secretly, I think she just likes the idea of helping people. "Let's hurry up. These Oak River people are nuts."

Not sure how I feel about the girls going to some fancy-ass mansion in Oak Park for a party, but I guess I'll be there as a chaperone, so it doesn't matter.

We'll stay for a few hours and then GTFO.

"Do my hair like Bernie's," Ashley says, handing me a can of red hair dye. It's the spray-on kind that only lasts for like, a day, but the girls are obsessed with it. My heart skips a beat at the sound of Bernie's name, and my throat gets all tight and hot the way it does when I think about her. That's how it's always been for me, that physical manifestation of being separated.

I felt like this during sophomore year when I betrayed the love of my life, my best friend, and my favorite person in the whole goddamn world for all the right reasons. To give her a chance. To send her away from Prescott. From Havoc and all of our fucking violence.

And, like in the most fucked-up and horrible way possible, my prophecies and my fears and my worries all came true.

I take the end of Ashley's chestnut-colored hair and lay it over the back of the chair she's sitting on. There's a towel covering the chair, too, keeping the fine red mist away from the furniture while I spray.

Thinking about Bernadette ... about her being shot ... about her dying ... that kills me.

"Okay, all done," I choke out, swiping a hand over my face as Ashley leaps up from the chair and races over to the mirror where Heather's still scoping out her pink locks—a color she attributes to Penelope since, apparently, she personally despises it. I sit down heavily in one of the other chairs while we wait for Kara to finish piling on the bracelets from her extensive collection.

The sliding glass doors open behind me and Hael steps in.

Our eyes meet, and I wonder if he can't sense what I'm thinking about. His guilt runs deep, but we all know that it wasn't his fault. I'm not sure how long it's going to take to convince him of that fact, but we'll get there.

"You're running like, seriously fucking late," he says, looking around the house like he's going to miss it. I will, too, in a strange way. But I'll also be relieved to start fresh somewhere else. Anyway, we've got some time to kill beforehand. We don't move for a couple of months. "Do you want me to drive? Since, you know, you drive like a fucking grandma."

"Fuck you," I fire back, toying with my phone for a minute. "We could probably get Wesley's on the way back?" Even though we've graduated, and the diner is sort of a Prescott High hotspot, I think we can get away with going there indefinitely. After all, we're Prescott royalty, aren't we? "Do you want to see if everyone else is interested in going?"

“Roger that,” Hael says, slipping back outside to the smell of weed. It’s our own strain—*Havoc at Prescott High*—and it’s fucking delicious. I’d smoke some if I wasn’t about to drive three little girls to a party.

My mouth softens, thinking about Bernadette in her pink and white Cadillac Eldorado, hair billowing in the wind. I exhale sharply just before the back door opens and Hael reemerges with Victor, Callum, and Oscar at his back.

“If you’re all going to Wesley’s, then I’m going,” is what Vic says as he breezes past, and I sigh. We’re out of the woods as far as the GMP goes—at least that’s how it appears with their infighting and power struggles up in Portland—and we’re not being tailed by the VGTF anymore, but Vic is a good leader and he keeps us on our toes, reminds us that we need caution around every corner.

Especially after what happened to Bernie.

Pain seizes me, and I have to brace myself on the table to remember how to breathe. *Bernie, lying prone on the ground, bloody bubbles at her lips, the surgeon coming out and removing the mask from her face ...*

I look back up as Ashley grabs onto my arm.

“Let’s go!” she whines as Oscar gives her a patronizing look and Cal shrugs into a hoodie. Even if Vic is taking his bike, we’ll need at least the Bronco and the Camaro. Or, I guess, we could take the Caddy ...

“Alright, alright.” I encourage Kara and Ashley out the front door and then pause beside Heather as she checks her hair in the mirror one last time. A smile teases the edges of my mouth, made out of bitterness mixed with joy. How can things be so bad one minute, and then so good the next? How could Bernadette have been shot? How could she have died?

I exhale again, squeezing my hands into fists at my sides and then forcing myself to relax them.

“You ready now?” I ask as Heather finally turns back to me. She nods, and I shoo her ass right out the door, too, heading up the stairs to open the door to my bedroom—a place so inextricably entwined with memories of Bernadette that I could never see it and not think of her.

Never.

Not in a million years ...



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Bernadette Blackbird

Graduation day ...

There are so many ways to end a story like mine. If I were to try, I would do it like this.

*Born of vengeance and hardened by hate
Every act of revenge a cry for love
Desperate to keep believing
Kisses that scorch my skin and leave forever marks
A desperate sort of havoc, a broken chaos, a mayhem that crawls beneath
your skin and makes you bleed
Anarchy that ensues inside a twisted heart
Only true victory comes with acceptance and mournful goodbyes
Only true victory comes with love*

I die that day. I do. Hard for me to believe it, too. Especially the peaceful part. Because after everything I've been through, I assumed that when I finally lost control of my body, I would find myself on a rapid descent to some sort of hellish existence. Instead, all I feel is joy because I made those last few moments count. I smile because I know my boys are there with me. It seems too soon to say goodbye, but some part of me understands that I'll see them again, somewhere, sometime, someplace.

Because love like ours doesn't die along with a body.

You really think Havoc's love is so fragile?

Fuck no.

So when the doctors—this beyond brilliant group of women at Joseph General that I never gave proper credit to—get my heart to start beating properly again, I come to with a sharp shock of recognition. *This, Bernadette, this is where you're meant to be right now.*

My eyes roll in my head, and the people around me are blurry enough that they may as well be angels.

"We've got a fucking pulse!" one of them screams, which is just about the

most Prescott thing you could ever say in an ER. That's the last thing I remember before I fall back asleep. Not sure if my lips are smiling for real, or if I'm just smiling in my soul.

But it's there.

And it's painted in the bright red color of victory.

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Aaron Fadler

Two months after graduation day ... again.

Lying there on my bed, earbuds tucked in, her phone on her belly, is Bernadette Savannah Blackbird.

A smile teases the edges of my mouth, and I close my eyes, remembering the words that fell from that surgeon's lips like a miracle I felt beyond unworthy to receive, like a supplicant at the feet of an all-powerful god.

"Mr. Channing, she's alive."

Of course, the surgeon said many other things after that, but I got caught on that word and couldn't seem to pull myself away from it. *Alive*. She's alive.

Bernie pulls out the left earbud and glances over at me with a brow raised. Even though the master bedroom technically belongs to all of us—her and Vic most of all maybe, but still—if she needs to think or she needs a moment, Bernadette always comes up here.

"We're ready," I say, and then I move into the room to offer my hand. Bernie reaches out and takes it, and even if she isn't entirely back to her old self physically speaking, well, her mouth and her sass were in full force even back in the hospital.

"Finally wrangled the brats up, huh?" she queries as she falls into my arms and I look down at her with every ounce of love and affection brimming inside of me. It's almost too much sometimes, like it feels as if all of that desire and want will overflow and flood the world. That's how much I love her, so much that I could bury the world beneath a blanket of that feeling.

"Brats officially wrangled," I say, dropping my mouth to hers for a kiss, one that tastes like the very first we shared. It zings across my mouth at the same time that it cuts straight through me, bleeding any insecurities or vulnerabilities that I have right out onto the floor. This is perfect, this is exactly where I need to be right now, in this place where each kiss tastes like the first one all over again. "We're going to hit Wesley's on the way back, so ... everybody's going."

"Oh, uh-huh," Bernie says as she buries her face against my chest, her hands clinging to my shirt. "That's why everyone's going? For French fries

and shakes? It has nothing to do with the fact that I got shot and you guys are obsessed with trying to take care of me?”

“I wouldn’t just say obsessed,” I begin, stroking my fingers through her hair and trying my best to hide the smile that lights on my lips. “I’d say fanatical. Or zealous. Something like that.”

Bernadette laughs, and I swear, it’s the prettiest sound I’ve ever heard in my entire life.

“Fine. Hot-blooded, impassioned, ardent, blazing, demonstratively charged men.” She gives me another kiss but on the cheek this time, and then pulls away to head for the door, dressed in a pair of my old sweats and a t-shirt that says something political on it. Bernie stuffs her feet into boots as I follow her down the staircase and through the living room, out the front door and toward the waiting vehicles.

Toward a future that looks brighter and brighter with every goddamn step we take.

Even though she’s supposed to take it easy, Bernie snatches the Caddy’s keys from Hael’s fingers, opens the door and climbs in. She starts a song —“*Dirty*” by grandson—and presses the button that brings the top down.

A warm august breeze teases her hair into a flurry around her face as she slips on a pair of sunglasses and glances over her shoulder at the three little girls in the backseat.

“You ready?” she asks as Vic gets on his bike, and Hael gets in his Camaro. Oscar and Callum look at me for a moment before joining Hael. A smile teases the edges of my lips as Bernie cranks up the volume and I move around the hood of the car, giving the Bronco a fond pat as I pass by and climb into the passenger side of the Caddy.

“Let’s roll,” Bernie says, sliding a piece of gum between her lips and giving it a sassy pop before she pulls out of the driveway with the girls raising their arms and squealing in excitement. The wind’s going to mess up their hair, but let’s be honest, I did a crap job anyway.

I lean by head back against the seat and laugh as Bernadette sends us flying down the street, the Camaro and the Harley following along behind us. An entourage of Havoc for a little kid’s birthday party. Sounds about right.

Because, Havoc, well, we don’t do anything in half-measures.

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EPILOGUE

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Bernadette Blackbird

Three months later ...

The bonfire is so tall that it kisses the sky; made up of old cardboard and bits of scrap wood fished from local dumpsters, it is clearly and proudly a Prescott High creation. I'm standing in front of it wearing my pink leather Havoc jacket while I wait for the boys to join me.

You're here, Bernadette Blackbird, I think with a slight twitch of the lips. It's been one year since Victor and I got married on this very property, property that we now own. Property that we can start renovating now that Vic's achieved every milestone his Grandma Ruby laid out for him.

Shit, just *surviving* the past year was impressive enough. And then to end up here? In love? As a family? It wasn't just havoc at Prescott High. It was chaos. It was mayhem. It was anarchy. It was pure victory. And we survived fucking all of it.

I slip a pack of cigarettes from the back pocket of my leather pants and put one to my lips.

"Need a light?" Hael Harbin asks, and I turn to look at him, standing beside me with a lighter in his hands. He offers it up and I lean forward, leaving the cigarette between my lips as I look into eyes the color of bitter chocolate. Some bites are a little sweeter than others, but don't mistake this shit for a Milky Way.

"I was going to see how close I could get to the bonfire before my smoke caught or my hair went up in flames." I pull in a sharp inhale, my lips painted that same beautiful red, the shade that tastes like freedom and new beginnings, but I could just be waxing poetic. The color *is* called *Victory*, after all.

"No more risks this year, Bernadette. You've already had enough narrow escapes as it is." His voice trails off, and I just know that he's thinking about it again, those last, few awful moments before his father shot me. Before he killed him. Before I died and then came back to life under the hands of some very skilled doctors.

"Don't do it," I whisper, leaning into him and letting him band his arms around my waist. "Stop blaming yourself. I already told you: the only way

you're getting my forgiveness for that moment is to stop asking for it and to stop feeling guilty."

"I know," he murmurs with a groan, nuzzling against the side of my head. "I'm trying, but it isn't easy."

I think about Ms. Keating's words on the last day of school—*nothing worth having ever is*—and I smile. She's been awesome lately, Breonna has. Not only has she acted as a babysitter whenever we've needed one, but when I was tucked up in the master bedroom at Aaron's house, convalescing and stoned off my ass to get through the pain, she brought me plenty of treats. Apparently, her mother was a Ghanaian immigrant and she learned to cook from her. I've eaten things in the past few months that I've never heard of in my entire life.

But it was nice, like taking a trip while I was confined to a bed.

I have a feeling Breonna and I will be friends for a long while.

Well, her and Vera—which isn't a surprise—and maybe even Sara Young.

We've had a lot of time to spend together, with all the questioning and shit she put me through as soon as I well enough to answer. Still, whatever happened on campus that day, it was undeniably in self-defense. You can't attack a bunch of high school kids with assault rifles and not find fault in their attackers. Still, in order to get out of any charges for our own illegal weapons, we had to offer her affidavits to use in court about what, exactly, transpired from the time Heather went missing to the time I was shot.

Regardless, I can't be mad at Sara Young. She's brought charges against Neil's father and brother and against all the rich, entitled assholes involved in either the trafficking ring or the money laundering through Trinity's mother's foundation.

Trinity ... All I know is that her father kicked her mother out of the house. For now, Trinity is still living with him, but I've heard rumors that she's no longer in his will. Gossip still travels well through Springfield. Doesn't matter if it originates in Fuller or Prescott or one of the Oak neighborhoods; we always know and we always hear. Because we are Havoc, and this fucking town belongs to us.

"Between Brittany and my dad," Hael breathes, but we both know how Brittany's life is going. As in, not well. Rich Pratt took a scholarship opportunity in Florida, so he's long-gone. And Britt had to explain to daddy Forrest that she had more than one potential baby daddy. Her friend Jennifer

—via Vera’s grapevine of social networking—told us that she’s started working in her mother’s bookstore in downtown Fuller. Maybe being surrounded by all those words and all those worlds will make some sort of difference in her life? Either way, not our problem.

“We could just as easily say *between Ophelia and Pamela* ... Hael, family takes turns cleaning up each other’s messes. That’s what we do. We belong to each other, so your problems are my problems, and my—”

Hael turns my head toward him and kisses me from over my shoulder, leaving me breathless and wanting, the way the boys always do. We’re insatiable, wild, little heathens with weekly bacchanalian affairs. Once we move into this house—and away from the sometimes too-watchful eye of Marie who’s been staying with us—they’ll probably be more like every other day affairs. Or maybe every day, at least for a while.

We kiss until the other boys join us, fanning out around the fire in the front yard of the old Gothic house, the one that Ruby cherished, the one that she left to her daughter because even when she knew that Ophelia was a snake, she couldn’t resist trying to take care of her one last time.

Aaron and Oscar take a seat on the old bench we dragged across the lawn while Cal crouches on a rock. Hael and I stay where we are while Victor presides over us like an alpha wolf regarding his pack.

“There’s a letter,” he says, showing us the envelope that his lawyer handed him during our meeting on Monday. He hasn’t touched it since, but it’s been sitting there on the table for days, brooding and silent and holding all its careful secrets inside of pressed floral paper. “I should probably read it.”

He stares at it like he’d rather just throw it in the fire and watch it burn, but his curiosity gets the better of him and he finally opens it up. The page unfolds in his hands and then Victor gets caught reading his Grandmother Ruby’s words.

“*Victor,*” he begins, as my skin ripples with chills and I think of Penelope’s last letter to me, the one that she left in her journal and that Sara Young gave to me even though she didn’t have to. I’ve read it so many times that even though it’s tear-stained now, I can still remember exactly what it said. Besides, I took about a hundred pictures of it with my phone and uploaded it to the cloud first, just in case. “*We are not always given the things we want. Oftentimes we are not even given the things we need. Your mother was given everything she ever wanted, needed, craved, desired,*

coveted, or lusted after.

“I don’t know if that’s why she turned into a person I no longer recognized, one that seemed to forget how to feel or care or cherish. But that’s why I’m doing this, why I’m leaving everything to you.

“But only on these conditions.

“I want you to learn to persevere. I want you to learn—period. I want you to stay true. I want you to be honest. Mostly, I want you to learn to love. Because love is the most powerful force in the known universe. It defies logic, and it makes fools out of us all, but it also gives us a reason to keep going, even when everything is dark and the world feels like it’s caving in.

“I love you, Victor, and this is why I’m leaving you the world.”

Victor stops reading and then drops the letter by his side.

Hael releases me then, so I can go to Vic, and he takes me into his strong arms and holds me close, so tightly that I know he’s feeling every emotion in the book, even if he doesn’t want to admit it.

“The world ...” he says after a long moment, breathing into my hair. Victor pushes me back slightly so that he can take my face between his big hands and kiss me until I forget that I’m human, until I become nothing but a spirit and a heart and a well of emotion that soars and tumbles. “She left me the world.” He looks into my face and then lifts his gaze up to study the boys—his boys, our boys—before turning his attention back to me. “And now I’m giving it to you.”

I know he means the money and the opportunities and control of the very city we all love to hate and hate to love.

But in his ebon eyes—yes, Mr. Darkwood lived, okay?—that’s where I really see it.

The world.

“I’m giving it to you,” he repeats, and then he kisses me, and I know without a doubt that he doesn’t just mean me. He means all of us. The six of us.

Havoc.

One year later ...

The air is poisoned with white dust. It floats everywhere as we make our way through the main floor of the house.

Now, with Victor's inheritance money in hand, we're knee-deep in the middle of a renovation that's just now nearing its zenith. To be fair, the place was a goddamn mess. There were holes in the ceiling, and pieces of the flooring missing, drywall covered in rot, and a fireplace with the stones tumbling out. The kitchen was nonexistent, the bathrooms were holes where toilets and sinks and showers used to be (which is a serious fucking shame because Oscar told us this place had all original fixtures until Ophelia sold off all the parts).

But now?

It seems almost impossible to remember that Eric and Todd Kushner were murdered here. Actually, I can only remember it when I'm stoned and the light falls in the upstairs bedroom just right and even then, it doesn't matter because they were fucking pedos, so their death is nothing but a blessing for the world.

Mostly, I remember getting married here in an expensive-as-fuck black Lazaro gown that still hangs in the closet at Aaron's place. Seeing as his mother still technically owns the house, and she's nowhere to be found, we can't sell it. We can, however, keep making the mortgage payments and letting Marie live there until we find her to buy it.

If we ever find her.

Not that it even matters.

"This looks so goddamn fucking amazing," I say, standing in the middle of the nearly finished kitchen. There are cabinets and countertops, and holes where all of the appliances are supposed to fit. It looks ... grown-up and strange and not like anything I've ever been a part of. "Who's going to cook in here? Hael? Aaron?"

"Well, it definitely won't be me," Vic says, and I snort in agreement. We're both shitty cooks. Nothing has changed since high school. Not a single goddamn thing. Alright, nothing in regard to cooking. Plenty of other things have changed.

First off, the fingers of Havoc's influence have crawled into every single corner of this city, every dark space or shadow that seemed off-limits before. With our money, with our experiences, we hold this place in thrall. Fortunately, since dealing with the GMP, things have been much quieter.

I almost miss being chased around by Sara Young. Almost.

“I’m happy to cook in here,” Aaron says, lifting up a bit of tarp and revealing the cooktop, embedded in the counter and ready to go. The double ovens are still missing though, and the fridge, and the dishwasher. “Shit, this is fancy.”

“We’ll cook together,” Hael informs him, making a picture frame with his fingers and squinting. “I can see it now: me in an apron, naked. My beautiful blond husband, Callum, standing by to massage my feet after I’ve cooked a hot meal.”

Callum snorts and flicks Hael in the back of his ear, making him wince and swat at him as he climbs up onto the counter, just to test out the crouching abilities of this new kitchen. Looks very crouch-worthy to me.

“I’ll eat the hot meal, and I’m cool with you cooking naked in an apron, but a foot massage? I don’t know about that. You’d have to really earn it.”

Hael throws a loose screw in Cal’s direction as Oscar pauses at the back windows, peering out into the yard and the gray mist drifting across the grounds. I move up to stand beside him, and he takes me in one arm, dragging me close and pressing his lips against the side of my head.

He’s gotten so much better about touch lately. So, so, so much better. One night, he even got drunk with Aaron and me and told us how he used to crave the pain of a tattoo, the pain of a piercing, because it was the only way he could fight back the nightmares of his mother’s cool arms around his neck or the feel of his father’s hands at his throat.

Things are different now. For all of us. When we’re all in bed together, I don’t see him shying away from touch anymore. He even lets the girls hug him now which is something I never thought I’d live to see.

Once we’ve spent an ample amount of time tramping around inside the house, we head back outside to where the girls are playing in the sun. I’m pleased to see them exploring the yard and ignoring their phones for once.

Shit, you sound like a fucking boomer already, Bernie. “Back in my day ...”

But I don’t say anything, just try as hard as I can to keep the smile that’s slowly sliding from my face. Heather asks me to take her to Pen’s grave a lot, and that’s okay, I’ll go. I don’t mind. Even if I believe that my older sister has been reincarnated in some far-away place, and that she can’t hear us, it feels good to talk to her.

After all those visits however, I started to dislike the austerity of her grave, the prepaid plot with a family stone. Penelope's epitaph was etched on one side of an obelisk, just a simple scrawl of her full name and the two most significant dates of her brief existence—dates that Pamela Pence formerly Pamela Blackbird was responsible for.

So I did something about that.

I stayed up every night for a week, curled up in a chair, poring over a poem that I scrawled in the notebook Aaron gave me. Even after all that work, I'm still not sure that I'm happy with it, but that's the true curse of an artist, right? A constant running critique and questioning of your own work.

Anyway, I wrote a poem.

*I never knew that missing hurt this much
Until you.
I never knew that love was a double-edged sword.
It cuts.
But the best parts of me are my memories of us.
Forever your sister, forever your heart.*

It isn't long, but I was limited by the size of the gravestone I was able to add to Penelope's plot. Obviously, money wasn't an issue, but nobody wants to read some gigantic, hulking piece of literature etched into the side of somebody's grave. It just needed to be short and sweet and honest, and so that's what I tried to do.

"Alright, let's get the fuck out of here," I say, gesturing at the girls to climb into the Eldorado.

We drive to Our Lady of Mercy, the cemetery where Penelope is buried, and I try really, really hard not to think of the Thing chasing me through these very gravestones.

The nine of us end up at her grave together, studying her new headstone which suits the space so much more than the plain and austere shimmer of the obelisk. After we've laid our flowers down and said some frilly, fancy words that are more for us than for her, the boys excuse themselves and I sit down with Heather.

I pull her close and I tell her about Pam. Not all the worst parts because she isn't quite ready for that. But I explain to her that Pam and Neil hurt

Penelope, and that they're both gone now. Both of her parents are gone.

She sits in silence for a long, long time.

"Are you mad that I waited so long to tell you?" I ask, and I wonder if she hadn't already Googled their names and found out. We try to keep tabs on the girls' internet activity, but like, fuck, it's so easy for kids to find ways around that shit. She could've seen news stories or headlines from anywhere.

Those first few weeks after the raid, the boys kept her offline completely, until some of the buzz died down. But still ... I wonder how much she really knows.

"I'm not mad," she admits after a moment, sniffing as I hug her close and we look at Penelope's final resting place together. "Because you were trying to keep me safe." She looks over at me and I wonder if she knows how much I truly love her. I tell her all the time, but you can never say that sort of thing too much. I only wish I'd savored it each time Penelope said those three little words to me. *I love you*. "I still miss them," she hazards after a moment. "Mom and Dad."

"You can miss them if you want," I tell her, giving her another squeeze. "There's no rulebook for grief."

So we sit there together, and she tells me all her best and favorite memories of Pam and Neil, and then she starts to cry again and I let her. I let her and I hold her, and then we say goodbye to Penelope and head home for movies and popcorn and hair-braiding that Aaron is getting better at but that Victor sucks at.

The girls attend Oak River Elementary; the boys and I build an empire; our love blossoms and amplifies and turns the entire world into a dream that I never, ever want to wake up from.

Five years later ...

Vera and I stop by the same ratchet ass coffee place that has no name, just a sign in the window that reads *Coffee*, and we take our drinks across the street to the newly created park funded by some of the inheritance money.

Shit, we meant what we said about staying here and improving the city. Already, Prescott High is thriving, lead by Breonna Keating and rife with

fresh funding for structural improvements and iPads, new desks and staff members with proper degrees under their belts. There are grief counselors and tutors and after-school programs for teen mothers.

Because even if I quite literally saw my husband put bullets into the heads of five people last week during a meeting with an overzealous motorcycle club, we're still community members, too. Really, we're community members first and foremost: we just clean up the blood and the shit and the darkness that rolls in every now and again.

It isn't in our nature to just sit back and relax, sip Prosecco out of fancy fluted glasses, and donate money here and there. No, we have to rule. We have to conquer. We need bloodshed and control.

And so, because there will always be an underground in every neighborhood, in every city, in every country, we hold the reins and guide the dark horse.

"Tattoo day?" Vera inquires after we finish our coffee and start walking again. I nod. Because it is. And it's been too long. This is something that should've happened like, years ago.

"Tattoo day," I confirm, glancing over at her. Her head is no longer shaved. Instead, she wears it in a glossy red wave down her back. Also, Vera only dates non-binary people and girls now. She says she's done with men. We'll see how long that lasts. I'd call her pansexual but really, she's more of a pan-slut. Which, obviously, coming from me is a compliment. I don't slut-shame.

"You sure you want to do it?" she asks me, glancing over and taking in my tatted knuckles. *HAVOC* stares back up at me when I follow her gaze, flexing and unflexing my fingers. In the past few years, I've added a few tattoos here and there. One says Penelope along the outside of my left thigh. One is a crown, inked into stark and mesmerizing detail on the back of my neck. There are others, too, more meaningless ones because not every tattoo has to mean something. That's a lie. You are allowed to get pretty art for the simple sake of aesthetic beauty. "Get all their names carved into your skin?"

I lift my hand up for examination and she swats it away.

"That's a gang tat, not a lovers' tat," she says dismissively, her pale eyes ringed in thick, traditional Prescott liner. "That will always mean something to you. I'm talking about the boys though. All five of them? Like, forever? Just you and them?"

“Just me and them,” I reply, because I’m not sure that Vera will understand if I try to explain how our relationship really works. It isn’t ‘just’ me and the boys. It’s *us*. We’re an *us*. A family. They are as intertwined with another as they are with me. It took me a while to see it, but once I did, I felt a sort of overall peace inside of me, that same peace that allowed me to relax when I thought my time had come.

Now that I’ve been there, now that I’ve seen death, I’m not afraid of it anymore.

“You know Scarlett Force, right?” I ask, and Vera rolls her eyes at me.

“Born and raised in Prescott, remember? Of course I know who Scarlett motherfucking Force is. She came to Stacey’s funeral, didn’t she?” Vera tosses her hair and adjusts her coat as we keep walking. As soon as we turn the corner onto the street where the tattoo shop—a place known only as *Ink*—waits, I see them.

Five boys in black, smoking cigarettes.

Or, I guess, now you could just call them men. They haven’t been boys in years. Shit, they weren’t even ‘boys’ during our senior year, were they? Just men. Just Havoc.

Aaron stands up from where he’s sitting as my chest tightens with that overflowing feeling, the one made up of beautiful things and happy dreams and hope. It feels like fireflies drifting through a sweet summer night or bubbles in a champagne bottle waiting to be opened in celebration.

“What about Scarlett Force?” Vera prompts me, and I reach up to rub at my nose to fight back a sniffle. Something about today feels emotional to me, even though it isn’t much different than any regular day.

“She once said, *if you aren’t brave enough to risk mistakes, then you aren’t deserving of quiet triumphs.*”

“And that means what, exactly?” Vera asks, but if she doesn’t get it, then she isn’t ready for it. So I just move forward and let Aaron sweep me up into his arms as if it’s been years. Really, it’s been an hour and a half, and we fucked in our custom-sized bed this morning, so I’m definitely being overdramatic.

But shit if he doesn’t smell like young love, roses and sandalwood. If his eyes aren’t the green-gold marriage of spring and autumn. His hair, chestnut with shimmers of red and gold, depending on the light.

“You’re here,” he says, his voice laced with a bit of dark wonder. Like, he

can never quite believe that we made it this far, that we're still together, that after everything we've been through we get to have this.

"I'm here," I whisper as Vera makes a noise behind me, and Ashley comes tumbling out of the Camaro, shouting and bouncing around her as she tries to show off her favorite viral video. Vera swats her away, but she's smiling, too, because she loves babysitting for us. Sometimes, when we go to pick Ashley up, and I see Vera staring at her girlfriend in the right light, I know that she's thinking about Stacey.

"Alright, let's get the fuck out of here and get some ice cream or something," she tells Ashley as Heather and Kara lounge and strut and act all gross and fourteen. They don't want or need a babysitter, but they're also part of Havoc which comes with danger. So, while we're at the tattoo shop, they can hang with Vera. You'd think the world was ending, but they'll get over it.

"It's far too cold for ice cream," Heather warns her, and Vera makes a grumble of annoyance.

"Hot cocoa then. Or pizza. Or I don't know, like books or something? You guys still like paper books?" Vera looks to me for confirmation, and I shrug. We can afford ... anything now. Really, anything. Only, we don't buy everything because we don't need to buy happiness. We found it on our own, in a dark and quiet corner of the world where the police wouldn't come and the people are poor and everyone calls us white trash but we wear it as a badge of pride.

Things could certainly have been worse. Truly, there are worse places. But for a while there, it was rough.

"Paper books are an institution," Heather says, aghast and confident. Because she's fourteen now and she knows fucking everything. "In a digital world, we all crave tactile experiences."

Kara snorts at her as I roll my eyes.

"Get the fuck out of here," I say, swatting her on the ass just before Victor pulls me into his arms and wraps his massive body around me. Heather stares at us for a minute before nodding and taking off after Stacey, like *she* is the one that delivered me to the boys rather than me delivering her to Vera.

After Vic found her in the woods that day, she's been attached to him like the father she always should've had. A good one. A strong one.

As he always does, Vic smells of amber and musk, he's big and warm and dominant and annoying and perfect. My soul mate with ebon eyes—one more

time, *ebon, ebon, ebon*—and purple-dark hair and tattoos and a monster dick that belongs to one woman and one woman only.

“Let’s do this,” he purrs, licking up the side of my neck and making me shiver.

Oscar rolls his eyes, but he isn’t actually upset. He just likes to quip and pick and needle because it’s how he survived for so many years.

“Miss me?” I ask as he adjusts his glasses on his perfect nose, as I take in the ink crawling up his neck and over his hands. The way he looks at me, with eyes the color of gravestones and fog and full moons edged in starlight, tells me all that I need to know. He does. He did. He’s as obsessive as I am, as any of the other boys are.

“Of course not. Why on earth would you think that?” he quips as I grin at him and give him a hug anyway, breathing in that distinctive cinnamon scent of his. His hair is still black, he still dyes it, and that’s okay. He can manifest his pain in whatever way suits him best.

“I saved you a seat,” Cal says, perching on one of the swivel chairs behind the counter. The tattoo artist looks on, unamused but also unable to say a goddamn thing. Because we’re still Havoc. And there’s still one gang you don’t want to piss off in the city of Springfield.

“I see that,” I say as he stands up and then hops over the back of the chair as easily as anything, moving over to embrace me in a sweet-smelling cotton and Tide scented hug. He still smells like talc and aftershave, and he still teaches dance in a big, beautiful studio in the southside that never charges a dime. His eyes are still blue and endless and perfect, and his mouth is still that of a fallen prince’s. His hair is still gold and reminiscent of sunshine. “Thank you for that. Because, you know, if I hadn’t gotten here soon enough, it’d have been taken.”

We pull apart with a bit of reluctance as I look up at Hael.

Hael, with the bloodred hair who still wears it in a fauxhawk, who still has a scar on his arm from a dad that didn’t love him enough, who still blames himself for what happened to me and sometimes wakes up with nightmares that I soothe away with the sweetness of my cunt.

We are a family, but we’re still broken in some ways. And that’s okay. Nobody expected us to heal into perfect model citizens overnight. Or in five years. Or, like, ever.

“Blackbird,” he says, indicating the chair with his hand, like he’s

performing yet another chivalrous act. An act like, say, fixing our cars after that shootout so that I can still drive around in a Cadillac with the top down and my red-dipped hair tousled by the wind. This boy, he smells like coconut oil and grease, and he still plays with vintage cars. He just does most of that work in the five-car garage that Victor built beside the old house. “Your throne awaits.”

I sit down and somebody—maybe Vic—puts that stupid ass crown back on my head.

It’s mostly symbolic, mostly just for fun.

Oscar kneels down on the floor beside me so that he can watch. He can watch as the tattoo artist cleans the left side of my neck and transfers the design we’ve been working on for weeks right there, beneath my ear.

Five names.

Not just letters.

But names.

“Necks hurt,” Oscar tells me, his eyes half-lidded and protective. “Horrendously so.”

Our hands curl together, and I close my eyes as I think about all the hiccups and potholes and bumps in the road we’ve been through in the last half a decade. He still gets scared sometimes, still brings me to the tattoo or piercing parlor, so that he can feel that sharp slice of pain and remind himself that physical pain is never as bad as emotional. Never. And also, that it’s okay to hurt and bleed and maybe even cry, although he never does.

The boys sit with me while I get my tattoo, and then they each get their own (even Aaron who already has *Bernadette* etched into his flesh).

My name, their skin.

All of us marked, drawn together with blood and ink and bullshit.

Then, even though we’re hurting a bit, we go out. We party. We drink. We dance.

We go home together, and that’s the best twenty-third birthday present I ever could’ve asked for.

Ten years later ...

“Stop it, Bernie,” Heather snaps at me, slapping at my hands. I’ve got a cigarette hanging from my lips as I desperately try to fix a stray strand of hair that’s clinging to her forehead. She looks beautiful—of course she does because I’m a Prescott bitch through and through and I know just how to do makeup—but she keeps fussing like she’s second-guessing herself. “My date will be here soon.”

“Do you know how relieved I am that you’re bisexual?” I ask, because when I found out Heather was going to her senior prom with a girl, I was elated. Nobody knows how tricky boys can be better than I do. I have five of them, after all.

“You’ve mentioned it, and it’s weird, so please stop, okay?” she asks, pushing me back and sliding her hands down the front of her dress. “Do you really think a boy would try anything with me anyway?” She gives me a look that isn’t hard to interpret.

Nah, there are three kids you don’t mess with at Fuller High.

Not unless you want them to destroy you.

Some weird, stupid part of me almost wanted Heather to go to Prescott—especially with Ms. Keating as the principal. Things are different there now. Shit, all of Prescott is different. All of *Springfield* is different.

There will always be an underground; there will always be blood to shed; Havoc will always run it.

Turns out though: there’s something called a happy middle ground for most things. For us, it was Fuller High.

Oak Valley is too elite; the wealthy are grotesque and obscene.

Prescott High is too sad; the building and the learning tools might be new, but the students are still the same old ratchet southside folks they’ve always been.

Fuller High seems okay, though. And, as Heather stares back at me from matching green eyes, I find myself smiling. Sometimes, when I walk into a room and the sunlight is just right and the air is perfumed with that lemony body spray that Heather loves because Penelope loved it, too ... I see my older sister in my younger one. My breath catches and I’m so fucking certain that Pen’s come back to life that tears spring to my eyes, and my chest tightens, and my heart thunders.

It’s never a disappointment though when I realize that Heather is Heather and Penelope is gone, because I’m proud of who my little sister is becoming.

I'm proud of myself, too, for raising her and loving her and giving her the life that she deserves.

"Do you think it's possible that I could just, like sneak out of here and not tell the boys I'm leaving?" Heather's gaze darts toward the staircase behind me like she's worried Callum might be crouching there and watching. He's done worse things to her dates. This one time, when she tried to date some douchebag from Oak Valley, the guy climbed out of his car to find Cal already perched on the roof.

Suffice it to say he never made it up to the front door to knock. Heather was pissed at first but later she admitted to me that if a guy isn't strong enough to face off against Havoc for her then they aren't worthy of her love and affection.

Goddamn it, but I love this kid.

"Do you think it's possible that pigs can fucking fly?" Aaron asks, appearing in the direction of the *parlor*. It's beautiful now, papered with textured wallpaper that I picked out and applied myself because even with Ruby's money now safely in Victor's hands where it was always meant to be, I don't like paying people to do things for me. And even if putting the wallpaper up was a pain in the ass, it was worth it because every time I look at it, my chest swells with pride and I remember that with a little gumption and a whole lot of determination, you can do anything you put your mind to.

You can raise three little girls even when you're just barely past the little girl stage yourself. You can fall in love with five beautifully broken boys. You can wreak havoc and make chaos, chase mayhem and incite anarchy, and in the end, you can find your own sort of victory. Whether that means putting up wallpaper or running an underground that functions in the dark without being consumed by it.

There are still drugs in Springfield; there are still prostitutes; there are still murders.

But Havoc is always there, always watching. The hammer of justice is in our hands, and we're not afraid to use it. There are no children being sold and no girls disappearing down the I-5 corridor. There are no cops whose hands are not tied to justice or Havoc or both.

Prescott High has been renovated, and it's full of laptops and iPads and teachers with degrees who don't beckon girls into selling their bodies on webcams. There's a dance studio where Callum teaches little kids who can't

afford to pay for expensive classes in any of the Oak neighborhoods but whose hearts are so full and so ready to learn that they find themselves with scholarships to places far and wide.

“Bernadette?” Heather says, waving a hand in front of my face. Both she and Aaron are staring at me, waiting for me to come out of my reverie and remember that my little sister, the one I worked so hard to save, is graduating high school next week. Going to prom this week. She’s going to college in New York and I’m both sad and excited all at the same time. “You’re not writing poems in your head again, are you?” she asks, but I just give her a wry smile.

“Where’s Kara?” I ask instead, because I’m not ready to explain the full feeling in my heart just now. It’s bursting and overflowing and the only reason I’m not frightened by the intensity of it is because I’ve gotten used to feeling this way over the last ten years. Shit, the Havoc Boys—who now, really, can only truly be called *Havoc Men*—make me feel this way every goddamn day.

“Right here!” Kara says, coming down the stairs in a dress that’s black and sultry and much more like something I would’ve worn in high school than what Heather’s got on. She’s dressed in pink and sparkles, and I can’t help but wonder if, like her body spray, the dress is an ode to a sister that she doesn’t remember nearly as well as I do but misses all the same.

I smoke my cigarette as Kara bounces over and presses a kiss on my cheek, her floppy, curly chestnut hair piled into a bun but with tendrils that escape and spring against her cheeks and forehead in a way that reminds me of Aaron.

My eyes turn his direction as Kara offers him a kiss as well, clearly also attempting to make the great escape before the other boys find us. Only ... it’s too late.

“I told them you two were trying to get out of here before they could grill your dates,” Ashley says in that smug fifteen-year-old way of hers, like she knows fucking everywhere. Heather and Kara both give her death glares, but Ashley doesn’t care. She’s so enamored with my boys that she slips up sometimes and calls them her dads in conversations with other people. She’s a bit of a snitch, too, when it comes to tattling on Kara and Heather, but we’re working on that.

“Not a chance in fucking hell,” Vic says, cigarette dangling from his lips.

Every year, I'm certain that he can't possibly get more beautiful, that I'll never be able to find him more handsome than I did the year before. And yet, year after fucking year, he proves me so wrong I could cry when I look at him. My husband. My boss. My protector. My emotional clone.

A knock sounds at the door, but I'm not surprised. In order for their dates to get up to the front door at all, they had to pass through the gate, past security. I've known for the last several minutes that they were on their way.

"I'll get it," Hael says with a Cheshire cat grin, chuckling as Heather groans and Callum perches on the staircase, a cruel smile painting his fairy-tale mouth. Oscar waits nearby, a brand-new iPad in hand, watching the door open with eyes the color of the full moon and twice as mysterious. "Well, hello there," Hael drawls, dragging both Kara's date and Heather's date into the room by their wrists. "You must be Brody and Bailey. Nice alliteration by the way, any relation?"

The poor teenagers look half-ready to shit themselves already, so I step forward and give Hael a friendly slap on the shoulder.

"You're scaring the fuck out of them," I say, gesturing with the cigarette and wishing I'd dressed up in something even remotely resembling like, what a mom might wear. Then again, that's sort of fucked-up, right? To assume that having a kid requires a change of style. I imagine that when the boys and I do start breeding like rabbits the way they've all been dreaming about for the last ten years, I'm still going to want to wear sweats with pink bats on them or cigarette pants covered in jack-o-lanterns. Anyway, when you're the queen of Havoc, you can't dress in mom jeans and chunky sweaters with cowl necks, now can you? "Hi there, I'm Bernadette; this is Havoc. And you've got nothing to fear as long as you don't mess with our girls."

Heather groans again and Kara buries her face in her hands for a moment, but hey, it's better than if the boys do the talking. Callum is casually playing with a knife while Oscar makes notes on his iPad in just such a way that making notes is just as menacing as playing with said knife.

Aaron and I take a few pictures and then let the kids get on their way. What we don't tell them is that they've got Havoc Crew members on their asses all night, wearing skeleton masks and waiting in the shadows. But hey, anything to keep them safe. That's been the point of everything I've done up until this point.

When I flop onto the black jacquard couch later, it's with a sigh of such

intense relief that I couldn't even begin to explain it. It's like ... I've been on a very specific journey for an entire decade, and that decade is now coming to an end. Heather is graduating, and she's moving to New York for school while Kara starts college life in the dorms at the local U.

It's almost like ... I've hit a finish line somehow.

Heather made it; she's safe; she survived.

You'd be so fucking proud of me, Pen, I think as I spot her ghost standing in the corner, smiling at me and wearing the prettiest pink skirt and the brightest pink lipstick and beaming like the whole world is on fire and burning just for us. There is no end to the things that I can do, that I can accomplish.

"I've always been proud, Bernadette," she tells me as I choke on tears and try to hide my reaction from the boys.

Of course, that's never a thing, hiding from them. Because they always know. Not once in the last ten years have I not felt seen by them. I rub absently at one of the scars on my shoulder where Martin's bullet tore through, and I smile sadly at Pen's ghost until she fades away with a wave, leaving empty space in my heart that I have no choice but to fill with love.

"You okay, wife?" Victor asks me, offering up a scotch that I accept between grateful hands. The booze burns on its way down, tasting like fresh fruit, butterscotch, and oak. It's far nicer than the crap we drank in high school. That is, except for the one exception of the fancy stuff we stole from Coraleigh's beach house. *Fuck, that feels like it happened a million years ago.*

"I'm okay," I promise, holding my glass in my left hand and grabbing my journal with the other. I've taken to keeping one, ever since Aaron got me that one for Christmas during senior year. This is where I write the first drafts of my poems. There's just something so ... visceral about seeing my hand move, the page indenting with the press of a pen. After, when I'm ready to edit my raw work, I type it out on my laptop, format it for digital eyes. I'm damn near ready to publish my first book of poetry. Since, you know, getting published as a poet through traditional means is damn near impossible, I'm going the self-publishing route. I'm a soon-to-be indie motherfucking author, baby. "I'm just processing."

"It's fucking hard, right?" Aaron asks, drawing my attention over to him as he sits next to me on the couch, reminding me of that first night we spent at

Oak Valley Prep. This is like a mirror to that except instead of my being upset about Pamela and Penelope, I'm celebrating Heather and Kara. "Seeing them leave with dates and wicked intentions. Kara was practically drooling over that Brody guy. And isn't prom when most teens lose their virginity?"

I give him a look that says *bro, do you remember what we did in high school?* But he isn't paying attention to it, staring at the fire as Hael pulls kindling from the basket nearby and lights it up for us. Teenagers are fucking skanky hos is what I want to tell Aaron, but sometimes parents just need to pull the wool over their eyes so they can sleep better at night. Also, I gave Kara a giant box of condoms last week when I found her naked with Brody in the pool out back.

She's just fucking lucky that I'm the one that caught her. The Havoc Boys are too goddamn overprotective for their own good.

"Virginity is a patriarchal social construct," I remind them, but that doesn't do much to assuage Aaron's fears. He downs the rest of his drink as I chuckle, letting my pen drag across the page as I contemplate starting a new poem. Sometimes, I sit here for hours and hours and nothing comes to me. Other times, I have to leap out of the shower and grab the nearest tube of lipstick so I can scrawl messy words across the bathroom mirror. "Anyway, they're safe with our crew. That's all that matters. Let them make their own decisions, find their own tragedies, and dig up their own triumphs."

I write that down, just in case.

"So," Hael begins, perching on the arm of the couch opposite where Aaron and I are sitting. Victor takes his drink over to the fire so he can rest a hand on the mantle and stare down into the flames. Oscar, surprisingly, is also having a drink tonight. Most of the time, he stays sober while the rest of us get fucked-up and it works out great in case there's a crisis that needs to be handled. Seeing as we're still Havoc, there's always a crisis, but we get through it each and every time. Together. As a family.

"So, what?" I query back, tapping my pen against the page and lifting my eyes to look at him. He meets my gaze with a warm honey-brown one, his smile more than enough to tighten the muscles between my thighs. I decide then and there that tonight is a group night meaning nobody is allowed to retreat to their own bedroom. I've got like, empty nester syndrome or some shit.

"Since Heather and Kara are leaving ..." Hael trails off and shrugs his big

shoulders. “Do you want to start making babies?”

I snort and give him a look that very clearly says *fuck off and die, Hael Harbin*. He howls with laughter at the sight of my expression while Cal very carefully pulls his hood down, revealing that beautiful blond hair of his.

“We could start having kids,” he suggests with a loose shrug of one shoulder. “Or we could travel first. I hear Nantucket is nice this time of year.”

“Nantucket,” Aaron snorts with a laugh of his own, shaking his head as his green-gold eyes blaze in wonder. How we managed to get here, to this beautiful happy ending, is anybody’s guess. But we did it. We made it. And all I had to do was die to earn it. “Fuck Nantucket.”

“How about Paris?” Oscar asks, musing aloud as he finally sets his iPad aside, loosens his tie, and kicks off his shoes. His eyes are so sharp and so beautiful that when they fall on my face, I swear that I’m bleeding and I never want to stop. My head gets light and dizzy, and it feels like I’ll be forever falling into him.

“Paris?” Vic asks, turning around with his obsidian eyes dark and a wry smile on his lusty menace of a mouth. “You fucking think we’d fit in there? Frankly, I’m down for a staycation that involves fucking, fucking, and more fucking.” He moves over to stand beside me, and I drag my attention away from Oscar to look at him. Each and every time, it’s like a punch to the gut, but in the best possible way, like my breath is being siphoned from my lungs but I’d pay for the privilege of dying in such dark bliss. “And yeah, if it involved getting you pregnant, all the better.”

“Oh, leave her alone,” Cal breathes, pouring himself another drink as he points at my journal. “As much as I’d be down for a Havoc baby, Bernie has other dreams. Let her write her poems. She’s a brilliant fucking poet.”

“I mean, I don’t know if I’d go that far,” I mumble, but then Aaron is taking the empty glass from my hand and curling his fingers around mine.

“I think we’d all go that far,” he says, and then he stands up and pulls me to my feet, even as my mind starts to twist words together the way an oil painter mixes colors on her canvas.

Once upon a time, there was a girl who dreamed in prose and pretty phrases.

She quickly learned that life is at its best unfair and at its worst perversely cruel.

Her dreams became nightmares, nightmares made of monsters new and

old.

And so she summoned them, her five dark horsemen, to wreak havoc and sow chaos, to twist mayhem and denote anarchy, to declare victory over every wicked, ugly thing she'd ever seen.

They came to her, those horsemen, and in return for their vile vengeance, they took her heart and held it in their inked hands. They claimed her flesh with carnal delight, but it was her soul that they craved most of all. And to them, she gave it freely and without restraint.

“Your brilliance is a jewel in a wasteland of a world,” Oscar tells me, snapping my reverie, making my heart race. I throw my arms around his neck, and he shudders. But not in the way he used to, when my every touch made him remember the worst parts of his childhood, but in the way of lovers well-familiar with each other’s bodies, in the way two soul mates find comfort in one another.

Because that’s what they are, all five of them: soul mates.

That is, if you believe in that kind of thing.

We head upstairs together, shedding clothes, ten worshipful hands caressing my body. When I fall into bed, I fall into it with five beautiful monsters. Five beautifully broken Havoc Boys turned men. We kiss; we fuck; we meld.

That’s how I get my happily ever after, wrapped up in ink and bullshit. Wrapped up in motherfucking Havoc.

Confucius says dig two graves before embarking on a journey of revenge.

I guess he was right.

When you go seeking revenge, some small part of you will die a death ... someday, somehow. But from the ashes of that, something new will rise, something different, something better.

“When you’ve been lied to by everyone around you, when you have nothing else, you realize the one currency you can carry is truth. So a single word does have meaning. A promise does hold importance. And a pact is worth carrying to the grave.”

There are two sides to every story, but usually, only one of them is true. I’ve given you my truth, written my words, told you my tale. It’s up to you to decide what to do it with it.

The world is built of stories, crafted of pain, outlined with beauty; every story deserves to be heard.

This one, this one is *mine*.

There's one word you don't utter at Prescott High, not unless you want them to own you.

H.A.V.O.C.

Hael, Aaron, Victor, Oscar, Callum.

And of course, Bernadette.

Cry 'Havoc' and set us loose, baby.

Blood in, blood out.

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The End

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Dear Reader

Wow. Did that seriously just happen? I'm still reeling from everything Bernadette and the Havoc Boys have been through, but I'm also so, so glad to see them get the ending they always deserved. This was the longest and most difficult book I've ever written. At around 170,000 words, it's the size of two normal novels stitched together, but oh so worth it.

I'm already missing these characters and looking forward to a few short stories about their future that I've got planned ... For now, let's leave them be to enjoy the fruits of their labors. If you're craving more, more, more then I highly suggest starting "[I Was Born Ruined](#)", the first book in another series of mine, one that's similar to Havoc in so many ways. Only, our leading lady Gidget isn't quite as hopeful as Bernadette but just as badass. And her men? Well, they're even bigger assholes. This is the next series I'll be finishing up!

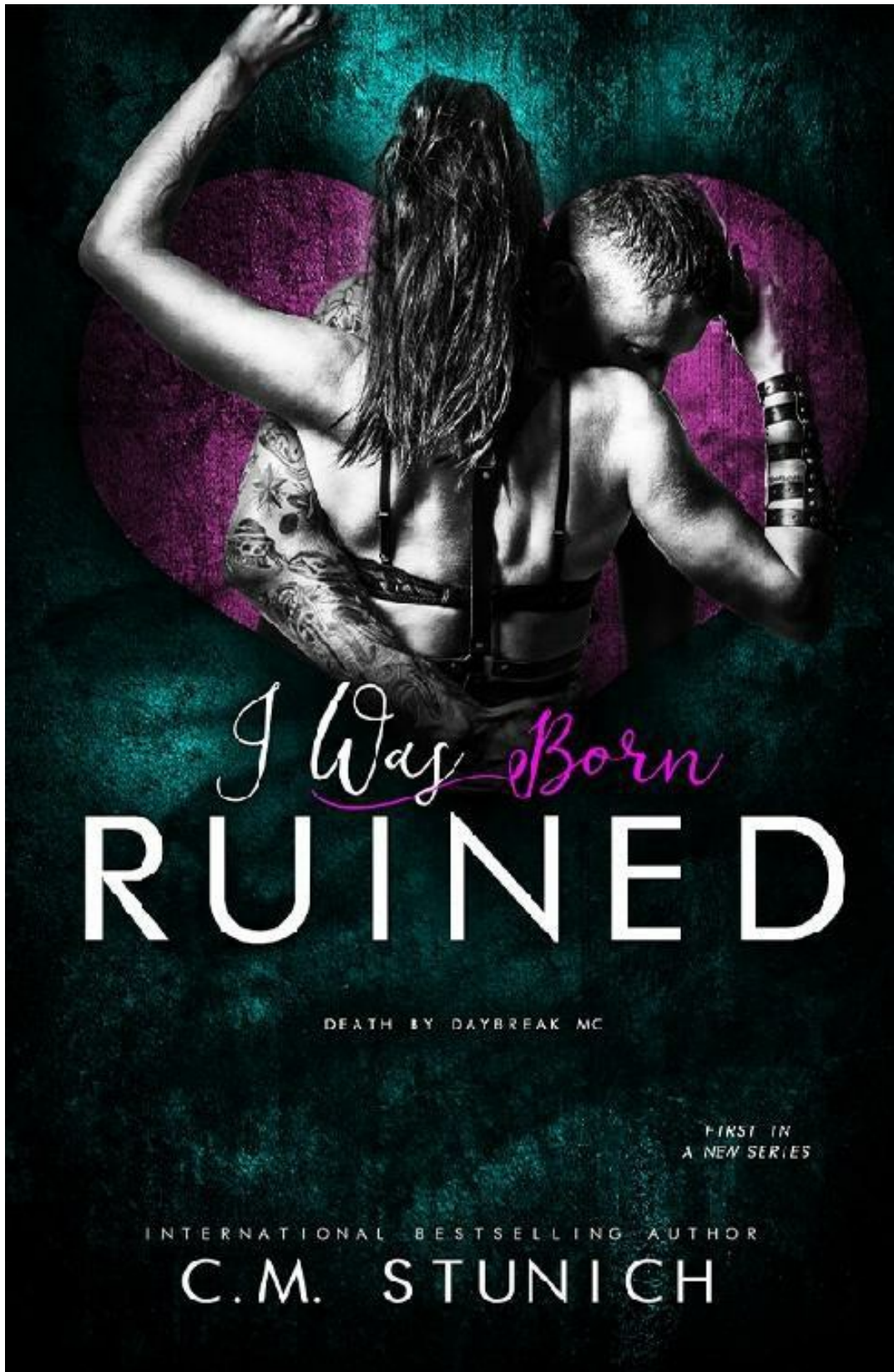
If you'd like to see more high school romance and drama from me, check out "[Flithy Rich Boys](#)" (the first in a completed series), "[Devils' Day Party](#)" (a complete stand-alone novel), or "[The Secret Girl](#)" (the first in another completed series). For fantasy, give "[Allison's Adventures in Underland](#)" (also complete) a try.

For now, I want to thank you so much for reading this series. It was extremely personal and born out of some painful events in my own life. Just knowing that you were here to follow on the journey with me makes every drop of blood, sweat, and tears that went into this series worth it.

See you in the next world, dearest reader!

Love, Caitlin aka C.M. Stunich

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[Death by Daybreak Motorcycle Club, Book #1](#)

I'm the princess to a dirty throne of motorcycles and madness, daughter of the president of the Death by Daybreak Motorcycle Club. My father's four closest officers; men dressed in blood and death and sin; they're my honor guard, cloaked in leather vests and tattoos. Only, there's nothing honorable about them at all.

Flip the page for an excerpt of chapter one.

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Chapter One

My first memory is of feeling protected, safe. Even now, the scent of leather and motor oil calms my nerves, the roar of an engine a siren song that I can't resist. For years, I lived under the blanket of a lie, knowing that there were people out there who would protect me, no matter what, who had my back. It made the world seem less scary, more manageable.

Then one day—I can't remember when—I woke up and realized it.

My protectors, my family, *they* were the monsters.

And their protection came with a hefty price.

My legs are cloaked in black, smooth lines of leather that hang over the edge of the crumbling brick wall. In one hand, I have a cigarette. In the other, a small paper bag wrapped around a bottle. Inside, there's about half a liter of Jameson with lipstick smudges around the rim.

“Jump, Gidge,” my best friend, Reba, says from below. She's dressed like a nun, in a long navy skirt that tangles in the brambles, and a white cardigan slung over slim shoulders. It's why we get along, me and Reba. I'm sin and she's salvation, that's why we work. I don't think I could handle two of me in the same *town* let alone the same school or party or sleepover. “I know you're afraid of heights—” she starts, but I'm already taking another swig of the whiskey and hopping down to land in a crouch beside her.

I might be *wary* of heights, but I'm not sure that I'm afraid.

I'm not sure that I'm afraid of anything, not anymore.

That's what growing up around monsters will do to ya.

“There must be easier ways to get to the bonfire,” she says, unhooking a stray thorny blackberry arm from the shoulder of her sweater. “Like, say, in a *car*.”

I take a drag on my cigarette and give her a look.

“Nobody in their right mind would risk giving me a ride,” I say, pushing past her and following a narrow trail through the brush. “And even if we could find somebody crazy enough to pick us up, there's always the chance Cat or somebody else in the club might see us on the road. Can't risk it.”

Reba sighs and pushes some of her wavy red hair over one shoulder. Yet another reason we're friends—*her* father's the pastor of a local church. Mine's the president of an outlaw motorcycle club. She's been trained to hate him from birth; I've hated him since I was fifteen. We might be complete opposites, but we have that in common.

Everybody else in this town ... they're too scared of my dad to hate him. Reba thinks she's got God on her side. I'm not sure that I believe in God, but I sure as shit believe in the devil. I've seen him, him and his demons.

And they all ride in Cat's motorcycle club: Death by Daybreak MC.

They wear leather vests and smoke cigarettes, fuck groupies and drown themselves in booze and the skunk-y sweet scent of pot. They tame wild beasts made of chrome, bury men in the woods behind my grandmother's house, and they don't lose a wink of sleep about any of it. I used to think of them as giants, guardians, big men with beards and tattoos and arms rippling with muscles that stood watch over me like an honor guard over a princess.

I don't think that anymore.

"I can't believe you talked me into going to this," Reba whispers, her Southern accent as thick as the humidity clinging to the late evening air. It's getting dark, and in the distance, I swear, I can see fireflies. They don't live in the Pacific Northwest, but a girl can dream, right?

I lead the way through the brush, alternating drags of my cigarette with sips of the whiskey. It burns my throat going down, but it's the only thing that keeps the memories at bay, locks them up and throws away the key. I'm only seventeen—I shouldn't have to deal with this kind of shit yet. Hang-ups and nightmares and emotional triggers are for people who've lived and loved and experienced and traveled.

I've been trapped in a cage my whole life.

So why is this happening to me? Old memories flicker up from the darkest depths of my soul.

Blood drips to the floor in thick, crimson drops. It pools around the knife, stains her white shirt red. It's too personal, the way she watches that blade, like she knows. She knows she's going to die—and I know it, too.

Ain't nobody wants to relive that shit; I shake my head to clear the image of my dead sister.

"It's our last big hurrah before senior year," I say, looking up at the yellow-brown leaves on the trees. It's been a hot summer, too hot. Everyone in our

neighborhood has a dead lawn and shriveled bushes, dusty driveways and a newfound hatred for the sun—our little Oregon town is more than ready for fall. “We have to make an appearance.”

“We don't *have* to do a darn thing, sugar,” Reba says with an exasperated little sigh. I glance back at her and see her pinching the scooped bridge of her button nose. She's the perfect Southern belle, Reba is, a Tennessee transplant with a closet-alcoholic mother and a proselytizing father. I'm not judging her or them—I don't have room to judge anyone—but I can sense that this is where the conversation's heading. “We're better than them, than all of that nonsense.”

“You might be,” I say, giving her one last look before I turn my attention back to the trail, “but I know I'm sure as hell not.”

I ignore Reba until I finish my cigarette. As much as she complains, I know she wants to be here, too. Everybody else will be. The whole goddamn senior class. She wouldn't miss it for the world. Reba and I might be best friends, but she's also friends with three other girls—Dena, Chardou, and Amiya. She'll want to see them, let them know that even if she hangs out with me, she can just as easily slip into their group and be one of them, too.

A few minutes later, I'm starting to feel the Jameson in my blood and my steps get a little wobbly, my leather boots stumbling to the edge of the path as I weave my way through pines still green with needles and deciduous trees with sun-bleached leaves. Buzzed like this, the whole landscape looks prettier somehow, less dead and dry and more ... I don't know, magical.

Despite the heat, a chill runs down my spine.

“Do you hear that?” Reba asks from behind me.

I do.

“Music,” I say with a sloppy, whiskey-laden grin.

The sound of an eighties rock ballad sneaks through the trees, weaves itself into the wind and teases my hair. Johnny R. must be DJing tonight. He's the only person I know under the age of thirty who still listens to Lynyrd Skynrd. But since he's also the only person with a professional DJ for a dad (a dad who lets him borrow his equipment, mind you), he gets to play whatever he wants.

We hit the edge of the trees and break through to the flickering light of a bonfire, built up and burning in an old swimming pool behind an abandoned country house. According to my mom, the family that lived there lost it to

foreclosure in the seventies. It's been empty for so long that even *she* used to party here.

There are people everywhere—at least half the senior class and some of the juniors, too—mingling around the edges of the pool, sitting on the weathered old deck with the missing railing, even lounging on the roof.

I don't wait for Reba—she'll want to check in with Dena, Chardou, and Amiya first—and head straight across the patchy, shriveled stretch of lawn and weeds over to where Johnny K. is sitting, smoking a joint and watching his friends feed wood from a stack of old pallets into the flames. In sixth grade, both Johnny R. and Johnny K. wanted to simply be “Johnny”. Our class organized a fight out on the blacktop, right over the faded mural of all fifty states in bright primary colors. They beat the shit out of each other, so bad that by the time the teachers caught onto us, both boys had to pay a visit to the local emergency room.

After that, it was pretty obvious that both Johnny Ranier and Johnny Kinner were going to have to settle for sharing the name. It hasn't been an issue since.

“Mind if I have a drag?” I ask, sitting down next to him and not caring that the school's star quarterback is checking out the low plunging V of my shirt. I wore it on purpose. Not for him, but for me. It's my body and I'll decide how it's dressed. Not my father. Not the club. Not anyone.

God, if he knew I was here tonight ...

I laugh and Johnny K. gives me a strange look, his blue eyes flickering like he wants to fuck me, but also like he thinks I might be crazy.

“Yeah, sure.”

Johnny passes over the joint and then runs his palm over the short, shaved brown hair on the top of his head. He's got a nice wide chest, big arms for a high school boy.

But I'm not interested.

I'm ruined for high school boys.

I think I was *born* ruined.

I take the joint from him and pause at the sound of squealing tires, glancing over my shoulder too see our school's running back, Trevone Hundley, coming down the curving dirt and gravel road like a bat outta hell. A plume of dust rises in his wake, highlighted by the two massive floodlights posted near the road. It curves past the collapsed fence of the old house's backyard

and winds its way down the hill into town. I have no idea *what* Trevone and his crew were up to in the woods back there. Frankly, I don't want to fucking know.

I ignore him as he climbs out of his car with a hoot, dragging his best friend, Kellen Doughty, and the girl they're always fighting over—Tina Flacco—behind him. I haven't seen the three of them at all this summer, but last I knew, she was sleeping with them both.

Good for her.

I doubt either of those football douches saves it just for Tina anyway.

“Whoa, look what the *Cat* dragged in,” Trevone says, flashing a white-toothed grin my direction, dropping his legs over the side of the pool and reaching for the joint. I take a long, hot drag, smoke burning my lungs as I hold it in as long as I can and then pass it over. “Miss Daybreak herself. Daddy let you out of his cage for the night?”

“Let's just say I picked the lock, shall we?” I tell him with a smile, leaning back and enjoying the warm summer air on my bare shoulders and arms, the silver bracelets on my left wrist tinkling. Raven-dark hair falls down my back in a silken wave as I look up at the stars, silver pinpricks of light in the navy wash of sky.

“Good deal,” Trevone says, taking two drags before giving the joint to Tina. He hops down in the pool and within seconds, the bonfire is climbing with orange and red fingers, digging its claws into the darkness and driving it back to the fringes of the yard.

More people arrive—big groups of them stuffed into cars, bringing coolers and kegs and unbridled laughter. I watch them all, part of the group but somehow still alone, sitting in my red satin halter top and leather pants, kicking the soles of my black heeled boots against the side of the pool.

For a while there, I almost forget who my dad is, laughing and drinking and smoking until my head feels like it's spinning.

“Well, somebody sure is havin' a good time,” Reba says, sitting down beside me, proper in all the places that I'm *improper*. Almost indecent, really.

Cat would so kill me for this ...

Some people—ignorant people—think that having a dad named Cat is a little weird, especially considering his ... chosen profession. But the guys call their president that for a reason. Cats are some of the most efficient hunters on the planet, taking down a wide variety of prey ... and also, everyone

knows that well-fed housecats kill for *fun*. Toy with their prey, play with it, torture it before they kill it.

That's my dad. That's *Cat*, president of Death by Daybreak MC.

And sometimes I think he's just as hard on his daughter as he is his enemies.

“A *really* fucking good time,” I say, leaning into her.

The acrid smell of smoke curls around the pair of us, me with my Jameson and Reba with her plain old Coca-Cola. We sit there for the longest time, until Johnny K. asks Reba to dance and she accepts, joining the crowd to the right of the pool and hitting the makeshift dance floor with moves that were probably outdated by the time this old house was *built*.

A few minutes later, Johnny R. gives up on trying to convert us all to records and old-school rock and sets up a playlist on his iPhone, leaving the DJ station to invite me to dance next. I abandon the now empty bottle of whiskey, run my tongue over my teeth to make sure there aren't any lipstick stains, and take his hand.

It's warm and sweaty and unsure. Joining Johnny R. in the empty dirt patch where my classmates grind and bump and grin and grope, I know I'm dancing with a boy instead of a man.

Flickers of a different party, a different moment, a different dance partner skitter around the edges of my mind, but I ignore them, letting the booze and the weed keep control of my brain and all the horrible things crawling around inside of it.

After a few songs, I push Johnny R. away and stumble over to the edge of the yard, where the black silhouettes of trees stand guard like silent ghosts. Putting my hand on the faded white paint of an apple tree trunk, I lean over and try to fight the sudden, overwhelming nausea spiraling through me. It doesn't help that on the ground near my boots, the plump corpses of rotten fruit litter the dirt like splotchy scabs.

The scuff of a rubber sole on the ground nearby draws my attention up and over to the black-on-black shimmer of a shadow hiding in the trees. As sick as I feel right now, my head still spinning with THC and alcohol, my hand drops to my boot and the hunting knife buried in a sheath behind the leather.

“Shouldn't mix pot and booze, Gidge,” a rough voice says, just beyond the orange-yellow pool of light cast by the bonfire. It dances through the dark, vertical bars of the forest, highlighting the dry brown sea of undergrowth.

Lifting my head up, I try my very best not to puke.

“Crown?” I ask, but I already know it's him because there's nobody else in this town that's as big as a house but that moves like a cat, padding on soft paws through the night. I swear, I can see his smile before I see his face, just the Cheshire's grin floating in the darkness. “What are you doing here?” I whisper, heart pounding, beads of sweat sliding down the sides of my face.

Crown is my father's right hand, the vice president of Death by Daybreak.

“Looking for you,” he says, stepping into the light, all six foot five of him cloaked in black leather and bullshit. Oh, don't get me wrong—Crown is as brutal as Cat on a *good* day. On a bad one, he's twice as dangerous and packed with enough emotional issues that he may as well be walking dynamite. But he's *charming* and he's handsome and the man all the club-whores fight over.

My stomach turns and I lean over, planting a hand across lips painted ruby red. Crown knows I'm not allowed to wear makeup—*ever*. It's just another one of Cat's archaic, sexist, fucked-up rules.

“As soon as I heard there was a senior class bonfire happening tonight,” he says, leaning his forearm against the apple tree, “I knew you'd make the great escape.”

I fall to my knees and throw up, the sickly sweet smell of overripe apples making the situation ten times worse. I just hope Reba doesn't see me and come over here. It's already pretty damn clear how she feels about the drinking and the smoking; I don't need further confirmation that what I'm doing is wrong.

“Finish up and let's go. My bike's parked down the hill.”

I raise rust-red eyes up to glare at him, wishing I'd never touched that joint. Pot on its own is fine; alcohol I can handle. Crown is right—I shouldn't have mixed the two.

“I can't just leave Reba here,” I say, even though I really could. Not only can she take care of herself—she says all good Southern belles know how to kick serious 'booty' if needed—but pretty much everyone here likes Reba. There's not a soul on this property that would refuse her a ride. Except, you know, maybe Crown.

“Reba's just fine, and you know it,” he says, his moss green eyes taking me in with a flicker of amusement and just the tiniest spark of anger. He rubs a hand over his mouth and the dark stubble surrounding it. “Gidge, you're

already in deep enough shit as it is.”

“Cat knows,” I say, and the words come out a breathy sigh.

“Yeah, Cat knows,” Crown tells me as I look up, and up, and up toward that handsome face of his. He has a nice square jaw, a full mouth, and green eyes that drop panties with a single glance—and trust me, they drop a *lot* of panties. In my humble opinion, Crown is a whore. He got his name by getting drunk on a whole bottle of Crown Royal whiskey—back when he was still a hang-around with the club—and ended up butt-ass naked on the roof with a groupie sucking his dick. Whore. That's what he is, no matter how charming he might seem at times.

“Fucking great,” I say, getting to my feet as Crown just stands there and watches me stumble. *Thanks for keeping your mouth shut, you asshole*, I think as I take deep, steady breaths and watch the world tumble and spin around me. But I know better than anyone that Crown—as well as the rest of the club—doesn't owe me shit. The only reason they associate with me at all is because of Cat. “I'm gonna tell Reba I'm leaving so she doesn't worry.”

Crown crosses his big, muscular arms over his chest, leather vest crinkling with the motion.

“What?”

“Your friend's just fine, Gidge. And putting it off won't make it any easier.”

I close my eyes and resist the urge to punch the apple tree in frustration.

Once upon a time, I *liked* having Crown watch out for me, knowing that he'd be there if I needed him. Now I realize that he's more like a glorified prison guard. He's there not only to keep me safe, but to *keep* me period.

I feel like screaming.

Instead, I open my eyes and start hiking into the shadows of the trees, Crown silent and steady behind me.



[Devils' Day Party, Standalone](#)

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RICH BOYS OF BURBERRY PREP, YEAR ONE

FILTHY RICH BOYS

ALL BETS ARE ON ...



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About the Author

C.M. Stunich is a self-admitted bibliophile with a love for exotic teas and a whole host of characters who live full time inside the strange, swirling vortex of her thoughts. Some folks might call this crazy, but Caitlin Morgan doesn't mind - especially considering she has to write biographies in the third person. Oh, and half the host of characters in her head are searing hot bad boys with dirty mouths and skillful hands (among other things). If being crazy means hanging out with them everyday, C.M. has decided to have herself committed.

She hates tapioca pudding, loves to binge on cheesy horror movies, and is a slave to many cats. When she's not vacuuming fur off of her couch, C.M. can be found with her nose buried in a book or her eyes glued to a computer screen. She's the author of over a hundred novels - romance, new adult, fantasy, and young adult included. Please, come and join her inside her

crazy. There's a heck of a lot to do there.

Oh, and Caitlin loves to chat (incessantly), so feel free to e-mail her, send her a Facebook message, or put up smoke signals. She's already looking forward to it.

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