



I can't deny the pull I feel to
all five of them. The buzz that lights
beneath my skin when they touch me.

Legacy of Shadows

supernaturals of castle academy book 1

TESSA HALE

LEGACY OF SHADOWS

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PROLOGUE

EIGHT YEARS EARLIER, AGE NINE

BLACK. So much black it made me feel like I couldn't breathe. As if each piece of it was strangling me.

Pressure built behind my eyes as people milled around the gravesite. They would shake their heads or mutter things like "*such a waste*" or "*poor Leighton.*" The only one who didn't seem affected by it all was the woman standing next to me, a blank mask on her face.

It was wrong. All of it so wrong I wanted to scream.

Dad would've hated everything about today. The black. The formality. The fakeness.

He should've been here. If this were any other funeral, he would've bent his head to make a joke about the woman's hat that looked as if a bird was perched on her head, ready to take flight. But he wasn't here. And he never would be again.

My throat closed in, a burn lighting at my effort to keep the tears at bay. I didn't want to cry in front of all these people. Didn't want to lose it in front of my mother.

The one time I had, after cancer stole my dad from me, she'd snapped at me. *"Stop it right now. I can't deal with your hysterics."*

I'd shut up right then. I'd spent the last ten days escaping to the woods behind our house. Finding what refuge I could in the trees and creeks. Remembering how my dad had taught me about the different plants and how to make a fire with only two sticks and some dried grass.

But that refuge wasn't enough. I felt the emotion building. That swirling feeling deep in my gut, the pressure increasing with each pass.

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming. I wanted to let loose all that ugliness eating away at my insides.

A minister clad in black stepped toward the casket.

I'd tried to avoid looking at it since we'd arrived. Dad hadn't wanted a casket. He'd wanted to be cremated and spread out in nature. But, of course, my mom hadn't listened to that, either. Instead, there was a dark wood, gleaming monstrosity that my father would be buried in.

As the minister moved closer, I had no choice but to look at the jail cell my father would be enclosed in for all eternity. The moment my eyes locked on it, the panic set in, sweeping through me and digging in deep.

My breaths came quicker, short pants that barely found purchase in my lungs. Each one hurt, as if the air were made of tiny barbs that shredded my insides. I couldn't do this. Couldn't watch them lower my father into the earth.

A hand wrapped around mine, squeezing, and I jerked at the familiar buzz that lit in my palm. That buzz had only ever come from one person. My gaze snapped to the side.

The tears almost came then.

Colt. The boy who I'd spent every summer with from before I could walk. The son of my father's best friend. He was my true refuge. He always had been. Even when we were apart all school year, the memories of our wild summers would hold me over.

"What are you doing here?" my mother snapped.

Colt's father, Andrew Carrington, turned hard eyes on my mother. "I'm here to say goodbye to my best friend. It would've been nice if we'd been informed of the arrangements."

My head jerked in my mother's direction. She'd told me that they were too busy and didn't want to come.

Mom's cheeks heated. "I told you how you could help. You weren't interested."

A muscle in Andrew's cheek ticked. "Not here, Maryanne."

"Of course not," she huffed.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the minister began. "We are gathered here today to honor the amazing life of Douglas Carmichael."

The panic flared fresh, and I couldn't get any air into my lungs at all. My chest burned as black spots danced in front of my vision.

"LeeLee?" Colt whispered, concern in his voice.

"I-I can't," I squeaked.

He gripped my hand harder. "Come on."

Then he was leading me through the crowd, people whispering around us. But he didn't stop. He tugged me through the cemetery and into the forest behind it. He only slowed when we were completely encased in trees.

Colt guided me toward a log, sitting me down and crouching in front of me. His hands went to my cheeks. "Breathe, LeeLee. Just like I'm breathing."

I tried to follow the exaggerated rise and fall of his chest, but it was no good. I couldn't get my lungs to obey. The tears came then, hot and vicious, each one scalding my skin.

Colt said a bad word and then threw his arms around me, holding me close. His arms tightened as I cried harder. "LeeLee. I'm right here. I've got you."

That only turned my cries into full on sobbing. I'd been holding all of it in these past ten days. So tight it was nearly killing me. Now that I'd broken that seal, I wasn't sure my tears would ever stop.

"I'm so sorry." Colt kept whispering into my ear as he held me. Reassurances and nonsensical mutterings, but they all soothed. Just knowing I wasn't alone helped.

Slowly, my sobs subsided, and I slumped against him, exhausted. "I'm scared," I whispered.

Colt pulled back, taking my hands as he studied my face. "Your mom?"

He knew me so well.

"I don't want to be alone with her." We'd never been close, but she'd gotten worse as my father's health had declined. Gotten crueler the more she had to deal with me.

Colt's face went stormy. "You need to come live with me and Dad."

A little bit of hope flared in my chest. “Do you think she’d let me?”

“Maybe. We can at least ask. I know Dad would love to have you.”

Colt glanced over his shoulder toward the cemetery. “We should go back before we get in worse trouble.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. My mom wouldn’t be happy about my stunt.

He helped me to my feet, keeping hold of my hand, and we started out of the woods.

It was the raised voices on the edge of the forest that caught my attention first.

“You don’t give a crap about us. You think I don’t know that? Leighton isn’t what you think, and the moment you realize that, you’ll dump her because she’s useless to you,” my mom snapped.

I frowned at Colt. But he looked furious.

“She needs to be protected,” Andrew argued.

Mom scoffed. “And you’re going to do that, how? I won’t let her get messed up in your world.”

“Maryanne...”

Colt and I broke out of the tree line, and both their gazes snapped to us.

My mom charged over to me, grabbing my arm and yanking me hard. “We’re leaving.”

I glanced at Colt in panic.

He kept hold of my other hand. “Dad, can’t she come live with us? She wants to.”

My mom laughed, but it was an ugly and twisted sound. “You think I’d let her go with you? She’s *my* daughter. You’ll stay away from her.”

That panic dug in deep, tearing up my insides all over again.

“Maryanne, please,” Andrew said quietly. “Don’t do this.”

“Stay away from us, or you know what I’ll do...”

She pulled me harder, dragging me toward the parking lot.

My tears came in a fresh wave, my vision blurring.

Colt yelled out for me, but his father held him back.

I tried to fight my mom’s hold, but it was too strong.

“Colt!” I cried.

“Shut up,” she snapped, shaking my arm. “I won’t have you embarrass me any further. You’ll behave, or you’ll pay the price.”

I snapped my mouth closed, but I couldn’t stop the tears.

My mom shoved me into the back seat of her car, and I pressed my face to the back window, trying to keep my eyes on Colt. If I could still see him, everything would be okay. But it was only a matter of seconds until he disappeared altogether...

PRESENT DAY, AGE SEVENTEEN

“ORDER UP,” Sal called.

I pushed off the counter and instantly regretted the swift movement. The bruised muscles on my side and back radiated with pain, and I sucked in a sharp breath.

Betsy looked up from where she was rolling silverware, her eyes narrowing. “Everything okay?”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep my expression neutral and nodded. “Tweaked my back when I picked up my backpack earlier today.”

She didn’t say anything at first, simply staring at me. But her eyes told me that she knew I was lying. “You need to take the day off?”

“No.” The single word came too quickly, but it couldn’t be helped. That panic settled into my bones. I needed every shift I could get if I had a prayer of freedom once I hit eighteen.

I squeezed my eyes closed for a moment, picturing that freedom. The images I conjured up got me through my darkest times. Those, and my memories of Colt. Even just speaking his name in my mind made pain flare to life in my chest.

His absence was just as raw now as it had been eight years ago. No, it was worse. As if time had intensified that burn of his loss.

I swallowed it all down and opened my eyes to reality. The diner that smelled of greasy food. The sweat that had gathered on the back of my neck from barely stopping for the past few hours. The pain that swirled through my torso.

I forced my feet to move toward the server window. Sal met my gaze through the opening. “On the left, girl.”

He’d called me “*girl*” since my first day here, over three years ago. As though if he didn’t use my name, he wouldn’t have to put the energy into caring about me.

“Thanks, Sal.” I always used his name. As if I were fighting back with each single syllable.

He grunted, shoving the plates closer to me.

I took the burger and the patty melt, the weight making those muscles along my back protest, and I started toward table three.

Two girls from my class chattered back and forth as they waited for their food. As I walked toward them, I caught snippets of the conversation. They were dissecting the actions of a boy. What his texts *really* meant and the tone of his “*hey*” at school that day.

The easy conversation made my chest feel hollow. As if there were an emptiness in me that would never fill. I couldn’t imagine what it would be like if wondering whether a boy liked me was my greatest worry.

I slid the two plates onto the table, keeping my eyes downcast. “Cheeseburger and patty melt. Can I get you anything else?”

One girl kept her focus on her phone with a muttered, “Thanks.”

The other glanced up, but it was as if she looked through me, not truly seeing.

I was used to it. That was what happened when you were invisible. But that was by design. If no one saw me, they wouldn’t ask questions.

“Can I get another diet?”

I nodded, grabbing her glass and turning back toward the counter and kitchen. But as I did, a glimpse of someone walking by stilled my steps. My heart gave a heavy thud against my ribs, and I blinked rapidly.

It was that telltale blend of brown, blond, and red in the guy’s hair, so much like Colt’s. Pressure built behind my eyes. I missed him so badly it was as if I were conjuring him up everywhere I looked.

I made myself keep moving, to turn away from the window. I moved behind the counter and filled the girl's glass with Diet Coke. I thought her name was Corinne, but I wasn't sure. I tried not to know details about my classmates. Knowing them made it that much harder that I was so set apart.

"Got someone at table five," Betsy said as she refilled ketchup bottles.

"Thanks." I rounded the counter and dropped the soda off at the table of girls. They didn't even look up this time, my invisibility in full effect.

I kept moving past table four with the happy family, checking to make sure they still had plenty of drink left in their glasses, and came to a stop in front of table five. I slid my order pad out of my back pocket and focused on the lined sheet. It was easier if I didn't keep eye contact. "Welcome to Down Home. What can I get you today?"

"What's good here?"

The male voice froze me to the spot, sending a faint shiver over my skin with its rasp. It forced my eyes up toward the sound. As if my gaze had no choice in the matter.

It was a mistake, looking up.

The owner of the voice was unlike anyone I'd ever seen before. While he was young, probably about my age, he was massive. Even sitting down, I knew he'd tower over me. The T-shirt he wore skated over defined muscles. Muscles that told me he wasn't someone you wanted to tangle with. Dark hair was buzzed close to his head, and a scar bisected his right eyebrow. But it was his eyes that held me captive.

Those eyes were otherworldly in their beauty. A golden amber so hypnotizing it stole your breath. But there was a coldness there that made me shiver, so opposed to the golden warmth of their color.

I felt the sudden urge to run. As if he were the predator and I were the prey.

I swallowed hard. "I-I like the turkey melt."

The guy handed his menu to me. "I'll take one of those. French fries. Coke."

I took hold of the menu, but he didn't let go. I tried not to tremble. "Did you need something else?"

He released the menu. "Nope."

The moment I was free, I all but ran back to the kitchen.

Over time, I'd learned to trust my gut when it came to people. I had good instincts that had been crafted over years of pain. And my instincts

were telling me now that the guy sitting in that booth, no matter how beautiful, could snap my neck with a flick of his wrist.

I WORRIED the side of my lip as I waited for the mystery man's food to come up. Every few seconds, I'd steal a look at him. Sometimes I'd catch a glimpse of those golden amber eyes. Other times, the sharp jawline. But it was the scar that entranced me most.

I had a million and one questions about it. How had he gotten it? Falling off his bike when he was a little kid? Or through some more twisted cause? Something that matched the darkness that radiated off him.

It was more than a darkness, though. It was a brutality. And that knowledge had me swallowing hard.

A hand landed on my shoulder, and I jumped as I whirled.

Betsy frowned at me. "What's gotten into you lately?"

I forced a laugh that sounded anything but authentic. "Just lost in my thoughts again."

Those eyes of hers narrowed in that way that called bullshit. "Don't forget to have Sal make you dinner before you leave."

Warmth spread through me at that. As rough around the edges as Betsy could be, she cared. She was probably the only person in my life who did. She made sure I always had at least one good meal on the days I worked. She'd make excuses of buying too much of this or that and gave me the "extras". And every Christmas and birthday, there was always something from her, the only thing I'd unwrap on those days.

"I will. Thanks, B."

She just shook her head and moved toward the back office, not one for gratitude of any sort. It made her uncomfortable.

The bell on the server window dinged. “Order up,” Sal called as if I weren’t standing right there.

There it was, the turkey melt. I studied it for a moment, trying to decide if the brooding guy at table five would like it. If he didn’t, would he slice my throat right there?

I shoved the ridiculous thought from my head and grabbed the plate. I headed for his table, careful to avoid any patrons milling about. Sliding the plate into place, I kept my focus low, away from those amber eyes.

“Would you like anything else?” I asked softly.

There was no response.

My insides churned, and I forced my gaze up.

“What’s your name?”

My throat went dry. If he were some serial killer, I really shouldn’t be giving him any personal information, but I didn’t feel like I had any choice. “Leighton.” The word was barely audible, but it was there.

A muscle in his jaw ticked. As if just my name pissed him off.

“How long have you worked here?” he asked, voice gruff.

It was an odd question. Who cared how long I’d worked here? Was this his bizarre way of flirting? Questioning a suspect before he dispatched them to hell?

“Three years.”

There was the slightest lift of his brows at that. If I hadn’t been such a student of human nature, I would’ve missed it. The infinitesimal movement made his scar stand out that much more. “You would’ve been what? Fourteen?”

“Yes.”

Why did I keep answering him? It was as if I had no control over my own mouth anymore.

He scowled, his irises darkening, and I stumbled back a few steps.

Someone slammed into me, and I let out a soft cry as their broad form connected with the bruises on my side.

The guy at table five was on his feet in a flash, shoving the boy who had crashed into me. “Watch where you’re going.”

The boy was one I recognized from school. He was one I avoided like the plague because he was cruel. Brian. He snarled, about to snap something back, but then he caught sight of my defender and paled. “I didn’t see her, man.”

Table five guy glared at Brian. “Then you should pay better attention.” Each word held barely restrained rage.

“Y-yeah, sure. Sorry.” Brian hurried away toward his group of friends.

Table five guy turned to me. He reached out as if he might touch me and then snatched his hand back. “Are you okay?”

I nodded rapidly. “Fine. I need to go check on something.”

I bolted for the hallway and slipped into the break room, my chest heaving. Panic started to grab hold, the edges of my vision darkening as I battled it back. Memories slammed into me. Punches. Slaps. The burn.

I dug my fingernails into my palms, the pain fighting back the memories. “I’m safe,” I whispered over and over until I could get myself under control.

Slowly, the darkness in my vision subsided, and I could breathe normally. I cringed at how freakish I’d been. I needed to apologize.

I hurried out of the break room and toward table five. But it was empty.

The sandwich sat on the table, untouched. And next to it were two one-hundred-dollar bills.

I quickly scanned the sidewalk, but my mysterious stranger was simply...gone.

TWILIGHT WAS DESCENDING AS I stepped out of the diner and onto the sidewalk. I glanced around the quiet streets of downtown, looking for any signs of trouble. My mysterious stranger. Brian out for blood. Whatever else might be hiding in the shadows.

There was nothing. I waited for my breaths to come a little easier, but they didn't. My muscles were wound so tight I couldn't get a pain-free inhale.

But I was used to living with pain. I could do what I had to even if I was in agony. So, I started walking.

There were still people out and about. Going to dinner or maybe a movie. People whose lives seemed so normal, at least from my vantage point.

I couldn't help but wonder what that would be like. To live a life where worry and fear wasn't pressing down every single day.

As I headed for the next block, my steps faltered. My foot nearly caught on the curb of the sidewalk as I took in a figure rounding the corner. I blinked as I righted myself, trying to get a better look at the guy.

There was something about that little crook in his nose. It looked so much like the same one Colt had after taking a baseball to the face when we were six. There were other things that resembled Colt, too. Or what I imagined my best friend would look like now, my mind filling in the empty spaces that eight years without a glimpse or word had left.

I blinked again as the guy disappeared from sight. As I did, the memory of the figure suddenly didn't look quite like what I had thought. His shoulders were too broad, his hair too dark.

It was official, I was seeing things. It shouldn't have surprised me that I was cracking up. That I was trying to conjure Colt out of thin air when I was so damned lonely.

An ache flared to life in my chest as a memory flashed through my mind. Colt and I were running through a field behind my old house, chasing each other in the rain. Our laughter lifted on the air, swirling around us.

Colt had become a symbol of sorts. For better times. When life was simpler. When my father still walked this earth. When everything hadn't shattered into unrecognizable pieces.

My backpack thumped against my side as I stepped off a curb, and pain ricocheted through me. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out.

Dumb, dumb, dumb.

This was what happened when you got distracted, when you let yourself get lost in memories of a life that was no longer yours. It was better to stay in the here and now.

I shifted so that my backpack was no longer pressing against the worst of the bruises. The weight pressed down on my shoulders, but I could handle that. At least the humidity wasn't horribly oppressive today. Fall was beginning to settle in around our small town in Louisiana, and I was beyond grateful.

Rounding the corner, I cut through one of my favorite neighborhoods. The houses were all neatly kept, with pots and planters full of brightly colored blooms. I'd saved up for my own pot of plants one time, but my mom had ripped out the daisies, saying they were a waste of perfectly good money. But I guessed booze and cigarettes weren't a waste.

I'd have my flowers one day. So many I'd get lost in the sea of them. I just had to make it through my senior year. Get one of the many scholarships I was applying for. And break free.

As I turned onto another street, the homes around me changed. Not quite as well-kept. The grass was patchy in places, and the paint a bit faded.

The walk home was a silent preparation for what was to come. Reminding me to brace for whatever might lie ahead. Because whatever it was, it was never good.

By the time I reached my street, the houses were a depressing shade that no one would be able to identify. Either because people were working way too hard trying to stay afloat to spend any time on their property, or because they simply didn't care. Paint peeled off the siding of homes, grass looked

more like a jungle or was burned away by who knew what, and junk littered the yards.

Trudging up a cracked driveway, a voice stopped me in my tracks.

“You’re late.”

The voice sounded as if it were coated in sandpaper and dunked in acid. Raspy and patchy, as if not every tone could make it out of her throat.

I stilled, forcing my gaze to the woman on the front steps. I wouldn’t call her “Mom”. Not even in my mind. She certainly wasn’t recognizable as the woman who’d raised me. Not that she had been especially warm then, either. She’d always been...distant. But I’d had my dad, so it hadn’t mattered.

But now, the woman who had once been so put together was...fraying. She wore jean cutoffs that looked more like underwear than shorts, a tank top that dipped low and had some sort of stain on it, with neon green bra straps peeking out, and a cigarette dangled from her lips. Her hair, that had once been a deep shade of brown, was now bleached within an inch of its life. Yesterday’s makeup had sort of melted down her face, making her look like a raccoon.

“I said you’re late, Leighton,” she snapped.

“I had school,” I said softly. I’d learned long ago that arguing with her was never a good thing, and raising my voice was a disaster. All I could do was give quiet explanations and hope that she would see them as justified.

Maryanne huffed. “What a waste. It’s not like you’ll ever amount to anything.”

I hated that the words still hurt. That they branded my skin, leaving invisible scars to match the ones clear to see. It was as if she were trying to counter every message my father had ever told me. That I could do anything I set my mind to. That I was kind and clever. Beautiful in every way. But to Maryanne, I’d always be nothing.

I stayed silent. Waiting for more. To be berated or sent off, sometimes worse. But she seemed too hungover for the worst right now.

“Chuck and I are going out tonight. You’ll clean the house while we’re gone. Every room.”

Every muscle in my body constricted at the sound of his name. Maryanne’s boyfriend had a different sort of cruelty. And the comments he’d begun to make over the past year turned my stomach. Comments I was terrified would turn to action.

“Okay,” I said.

“Speak up,” Maryanne barked.

“Okay,” I echoed louder.

Her eyes narrowed. “You talking back to me?”

This was the game we always played. How she could accuse me of something that wasn’t my fault, then think of the myriad of ways to punish me for it.

“No, ma’am.”

Maryanne laughed, but it had an ugly twist to it. “Just remember, I can kick you out of here whenever I damn well please, so you better earn your keep.”

I simply nodded, my throat too tight to speak.

“Get out of my sight,” she snipped.

I didn’t hesitate. I headed for the detached garage as fast as my feet would carry me, not caring that my backpack thumped against the bruises along my side. Slipping my key from my pocket, I unlocked the side door.

Old junk was piled up, things my mom didn’t want to give away for one reason or another, even though they were broken beyond repair. But those broken things had become my wall of protection.

I figured my mom knew I stayed back here, but she never bothered trying to find me, even though my room in the house lay vacant. It had ever since the day of my sixteenth birthday. Instead, I’d made a home amongst the trash. It was fitting, given that was all she thought I was.

I wound through stacks of car parts and old appliances, boxes of magazines, and who knew what else. It was a path I knew by heart. I could make it through the maze blindfolded and in the dark.

A soft meow sounded from deeper in the space. A smile tugged at my lips, the first one since I’d left my safe haven this morning. “I’m coming,” I called.

Briar answered with another meow, a little more insistent this time.

I made it through the maze and stepped into the tiny home I’d made myself. An old mattress was pushed up against the wall, covered in quilts I’d found in one of the boxes Maryanne had stored in here. A milk crate lay next to it that I’d turned into a nightstand. A camping lantern sat on top of the nightstand that was just enough light to do homework. I’d created a dresser of sorts from empty boxes that housed my few outfits and other belongings. It wasn’t much, but I could breathe in here.

Briar brushed against my legs, and I slid my backpack off so that I could pick her up. She meowed and butted her head against my chin. “I missed you, too.”

I stroked behind her ear that was missing the tip from some fight she’d had before I’d rescued her. Who was I kidding? She was the one who’d done the rescuing.

A creaking sound had me tensing, panic setting in. Chuck and Maryanne had always been too lazy to search for me, but maybe that was changing. I frantically searched the space for my baseball bat.

“LeeLee?”

I froze. That voice. I knew it almost better than my own, even after not hearing it for eight years. It wasn’t possible, yet hope bloomed in my chest. Treacherous hope. I didn’t want to look because I didn’t want to find out I was wrong.

“LeeLee...”

There it was again. I forced my gaze toward the sound. My eyes locked with ones that were a unique sort of hazel. A mixture of green with flecks of gold and other tones I couldn’t identify but had always tried.

“Colt?” I croaked.

I DRANK him in as if I'd been wandering the desert for a week with no water. No one called me LeeLee but Colt. No one had that unique lilt to their voice when they said my name. Though that voice was deeper now.

His voice wasn't the only thing that had changed. I was pretty tall, but Colt towered over me, having to be at least four inches over six feet. His shoulders were broad and encased in muscle. But that hair was the same. A mix of an infinite number of colors. Blonds and browns and even a hint of red in there. But it only made his eyes pop more. Eyes that had always hypnotized me.

"How?" I whispered.

Colt took a step closer. The movement was slow, as if he might be approaching an injured animal. "I guess with the internet, you can find just about anyone these days."

I wasn't sure how true that was. I'd never been able to find Colt. There were no social media profiles or news articles with his name. I'd so badly wanted a piece of my old life to hold on to. Something that reminded me that I had the ability to be happy.

"Missed you, LeeLee."

Those words almost broke me. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep the tears at bay. "I missed you, too."

As Colt moved closer, his nostrils flared, and he froze. The gold in his hazel eyes seemed to glow in the low light, and Briar let out a loud hiss.

"Hey," I scolded her. "It's okay. He's a friend."

Or he had been.

Colt grinned. It was that same lopsided curve of his lips that I remembered, only now, it hit me somewhere different. “Good to see you have a protector.”

I glanced down at my cat. “She doesn’t like many people.” Not that she’d had the chance to meet that many after I’d rescued her, but she hadn’t shown any interest either. She was happy in our little junkyard haven.

Colt surveyed the space around us, and my cheeks heated as I imagined it through his eyes. For me, it was my safe place, but to him, it was probably a sty. His throat worked as he swallowed. “This is where you live?”

I bent, setting Briar on the ground. She scampered onto our bed. “It gives me more privacy than the house.”

Colt’s swirling hazel eyes came back to me. But it wasn’t a simple glance. That gaze probed, feeling as though it could see things I didn’t want anyone to know. “Your mom lives in the house?”

Something about the way he asked it told me he already knew. “With her boyfriend.”

Colt’s jaw worked back and forth. “You don’t want to stay with them?”

I’d rather jab a hot poker in my eye, but Colt didn’t need to know that. “What teenager wants to hang out with her parent?”

Those hazel eyes kept studying me, and I swore he knew I was lying. “You shouldn’t be living like this.”

I stiffened at that. “Not all of us have a choice. I’m doing the best I can with what I have.”

“Shit. I’m not judging you, I just—” He ran a hand through his hair as he started to pace.

“Dial it back a notch,” a low voice said as a figure stepped from the shadows.

I scrambled backward as someone stepped into the light. But then I couldn’t move. It was as if he had some sort of power that held me captive.

“You,” I whispered. My mysterious stranger from table five.

Colt shoved the guy. “What the hell, man? I told you to stay in the car.”

He barely moved with Colt’s shove. “You were taking too long.”

“You know him?” I squeaked.

Colt’s gaze cut to me, and he winced. “Sorry, LeeLee. This is one of my best friends, Ronan. He has no manners.”

Ronan scoffed. “We need to move. It’ll be dark in a few hours, and we need to be gone by then.”

Colt shot him a look I couldn’t decipher.

“We don’t have allies here,” Ronan gritted out.

“You’re leaving tonight?” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. If Colt had come all this way from wherever he lived now, wouldn’t he want to stay for longer than five minutes?

Colt’s expression softened as he turned to me. “We have to.”

Ronan stepped forward. “And you’re coming with us.”

I CHOKED on nothing but air. “What?”

Colt glared at Ronan. “I was going to ease her into things.”

“We don’t have time,” he growled.

“Will someone explain what’s going on?” My voice wasn’t loud, but it still had both guys turning in my direction.

Colt shuffled his feet. “I’ve been watching you for the past few days.”

My heart hammered against my ribs. “I saw you. I thought I was losing my mind, imagining some invisible friend...” Because the truth was, the only friend I had was Briar.

Colt met my gaze, so much concern in his. “I’m sorry. I know I didn’t have any right. I just—I didn’t want to interfere in your life if you were happy.”

My focus dropped to my shoes, my cheeks heating. All I could do was stare at the place where the fabric was fraying. I’d need new shoes before winter, and that would mean taking on more shifts at the diner.

“LeeLee,” Colt said, his voice a coaxing croon. “You don’t talk to anyone. It’s like you’re a ghost. No one even acknowledges your presence.”

That hadn’t always been the case, but over the years, I’d gotten good at fading into the background. It was safer that way.

“And no one should live like this,” Ronan snapped.

The heat on my cheeks intensified. “I’m fine.”

Colt moved in closer. “You’re not. And I can help.”

“We can help,” Ronan corrected.

“Look at me, LeeLee.”

I swallowed hard, forcing my gaze to Colt’s.

His own swept over my face as if he were memorizing it. “We’ve got more than enough room. I’ve already talked to our school, and you can start whenever you want. You’d be safe.”

“And you wouldn’t have to live in a trash heap,” Ronan said under his breath.

Colt whirled on his friend. “You’re not helping.”

For the briefest second, rage flashed in Ronan’s eyes. Somehow, I knew that it was an anger that was always there. He simply kept it covered most of the time. “I’m just speaking the truth.” He reached out and knocked against the outer wall. “She doesn’t even have insulation or electricity. Can you imagine how cold it is in the winter?”

Colt’s jaw ground together. “Again, seriously unhelpful.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, my voice barely audible. “I’m not eighteen. Maryanne will never let me go.” For all the threats of kicking me to the curb, I knew my so-called mother would never let me leave and head off to some life that might be better. A life where I could dare to be happy.

A grin spread across Ronan’s face, but it had a feral quality to it. “Leave that to me.”

My eyes flared as my gaze ping-ponged between the two guys. It finally landed on Colt. “Is he serious?”

Colt shrugged, but tension still radiated through him. “Ronan has a way of bringing people around to his way of thinking.”

That might be true, but Ronan had never met my mother.

He seemed to guess my uncertainty. “Give me ten minutes, and she’ll sign the paperwork.”

Paperwork? They’d come prepared. “This is crazy.”

Ronan’s eyes narrowed. “No crazier than staying somewhere you’re clearly miserable.”

I winced. Because it was true. There was no way that going to stay with Colt and his father, a man who’d always been kind to me, would be worse than this. And if it was, I’d leave. I’d be eighteen in nine months, and I could keep a low profile until then.

Colt moved in even closer. So close I could feel the heat coming off him in waves. “Please. I need to know you’re safe.”

There was such desperation in his voice that any remaining reservations melted away. “Okay.”

Breath whooshed out of Colt, and the tension that had strung his shoulders tight eased. “Thank you.” He turned to Ronan. “Move fast.”

Ronan’s grin widened. “With pleasure.”

He disappeared into the piles of junk just as quickly as he’d appeared. Colt turned back to me. “Do you have anything that you want to bring with you?”

I glanced around the space. There wasn’t much. But I needed to take what I could in case I had to run. My gaze settled on my cat. “I can’t go without Briar.” There wasn’t anyone who would care for her without me here.

Colt studied my feline. Briar bared her teeth at him. “Okay.” He pulled out his phone and began texting. “I’ll make sure there’s all the stuff at the house that a cat would need.”

My throat tightened. “Thank you.”

Colt shoved the phone back in his pocket. “We really do need to get going, though.”

“Of course.” I hurried over to my makeshift dresser and pulled out an old duffel bag. I began shoving the few clothing items I had in it. They were all a bit raggedy, but if I was going to finally be free, I could use the money I made while working to buy some new things instead of my mom taking it to feed whatever habit currently held her captive.

Zippering up my bag, I dropped it on the bed. Then I bent to empty my backpack. I wouldn’t need the textbooks, but I wanted my notebooks and pens.

Colt sucked in a breath, and I froze.

Dumb, dumb, dumb.

I hadn’t been paying attention. Too lost in the possible taste of freedom. And my shirt had ridden up, exposing the black and blue marks along my side.

Slowly, I straightened and turned to face Colt.

His eyes were fixed on my side, as if he could still see the marks. The gold in his irises glowed like fire. “Who. Hurt. You?”

I FROZE. The rage pulsing through Colt was a living, breathing thing. It swirled around him, permeating the air.

“No one. I fell.” The words tumbled out of my mouth on instinct. Years of reasoning away black and blue marks had ingrained the response.

Colt’s nostrils flared as he struggled to get his breathing under control. “There’s a shoe mark on your damn ribs.”

Shit. This was why I kept my distance from the people around me. Then they couldn’t see what my life had become. But Colt was different. He’d always seen more. How Maryanne had never quite settled into the role of mother. How her careless words cut me to the core. How I’d never felt as though I fit.

Even though we’d only seen Colt and Andrew when they’d spent their summers in a cottage not far from our house in Michigan, he could see it all. But after my father’s funeral, Maryanne had moved us almost instantly. I’d begged her to tell Andrew where we were going, but she’d refused, saying, “*You think they want anything to do with you? They only cared about your father. We’re nothing to them.*”

And there was a part of me that had started to believe we had been nothing because this was the first time I’d seen any sign of the Carringtons. But as I took stock of the fury still raging in Colt’s expression, I knew that wasn’t true.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said softly. “I’m leaving.”

“Of course, it fucking matters,” Colt spat. “I’m going to end whoever put those marks on you.”

Panic dug its icy claws into me. “Don’t.”

If Colt got into trouble because of me, I'd never be able to live with myself. But he didn't seem especially swayed by my request.

I moved closer to him, wanting to reach out and touch him, but it had been so long. It felt like I didn't have the right anymore. "Please. I just want to go."

Colt let out a ragged breath and then pulled me into his arms. The moment he encircled me, images flashed in my mind. Colt and I when we were younger, playing in a creek near my old house, him splashing me with a wild laugh. Then another image. Us, middle-aged, dressed in evening wear and dancing across a ballroom, the gold in his eyes glowing. "*I love you, LeeLee.*"

I blinked against Colt's chest. I was officially losing it. I'd gone from imaginary friends to an entire imaginary life.

Colt's arms didn't loosen as he held on to me, and slowly, my body relaxed, melting into his embrace. For the first time in years, I felt safe.

His lips ghosted over my hair. "I'm so sorry. I should've been here."

"There's no way you could've known." My voice was barely a whisper, but Colt clearly heard me because he only held me tighter.

"I promise, no one is going to hurt you again."

But I knew that wasn't the truth. Life was full of a million pains that were impossible to escape. So, I didn't say a thing. I simply soaked in the warmth of Colt's body pressed against mine. I reveled in that feeling of safety.

I didn't know how long we stayed like that, but eventually, Colt peeled his arms off me. His eyes didn't seem to be glowing anymore, that edge taken off his temper. "What else do you need?"

I crouched down, emptying the textbooks from my backpack and laying them on top of the makeshift dresser. I moved to the other end, pulling away one of the boxes to reveal a small hole in the wall. My hand reached inside and felt for the small box.

It was all I had left of my dad. A couple of photos and the only mementos Maryanne hadn't stolen to be hocked or thrown away. My fingers closed around the ornate wooden box. I knew the feel of it by heart, taking it out every time I missed my dad.

I hurried to shove the box into my backpack and then turned to Colt. "I need to get Briar in her kennel."

Colt eyed the cat dubiously. "Does she like her kennel?"

I bit my bottom lip. “Not particularly...”

He muttered a curse. “I should’ve brought armor.”

I chuckled. It wouldn’t have been a bad idea. “If you can hold the carrier steady, I’ll get her in there.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt,” he argued.

“I won’t. I’ve done this before.” I’d found a vet that offered discounted vaccines to animals that had been adopted, and I took her there once a year.

Colt grabbed the kennel in the corner and opened it. “Ready.”

I scooped up Briar, but she was already eyeing the carrier, her fur bristling. I scratched behind her ear. “It’s okay. It’ll be worth it, I promise. We’re getting out of here.”

She let out a baleful moan as we approached Colt.

“I’m gonna move quick,” I said.

“Smart,” he agreed.

As fast as possible, I pushed Briar into the carrier. But she was quicker than me, hissing and swiping at Colt’s arm. He cursed as he shut the door to the kennel, locking it.

“I’m so sorry.” I winced as I took in the blood on his forearm.

Colt wiped it with the bottom of his T-shirt. “It’s nothing. I’ve had way worse than this.”

Guilt still pricked at me.

“Come on. Let’s get this stuff in the car,” Colt urged, as he grabbed my duffel and then the carrier.

“I can get Briar,” I said, picking up my backpack.

“I’ve got her.”

My cat hissed at that.

Colt just chuckled. “She really doesn’t like me.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “She hasn’t had much of a chance to meet other people.”

“She will now.”

My stomach twisted at that. I wasn’t used to people. How long had it been since I’d talked to anyone other than people at the diner or my mother when she was ordering me around or berating me? I honestly didn’t know.

I followed Colt through my maze of junk. He somehow already knew the way. By the time we got outside, the sun hung lower in the sky. Colt beeped the locks on a Range Rover SUV that was now parked in the

driveway. He placed Briar's carrier in the back seat, and we put my other bags in the trunk.

Anxiety swept through me. Was I really doing this?

Colt reached out and squeezed my hand. "This is going to be good."

A buzz traveled up my arm like a low hum of energy. Colt's eyes locked with mine, glowing again, and I sucked in a breath. I opened my mouth to say something, but a shriek cut me off.

Maryanne's shrill voice cut through the air. "I'll fucking kill you!"

MY FEET WERE MOVING before my brain gave them the command, charging toward the house and up the back stairs that looked as if they could give out at any moment. Colt called my name, but I didn't listen. I knew better than anyone just how vicious Maryanne could be, and I wasn't going to leave Ronan to deal with her, even if he was a stranger.

I slid open the patchy screen door and skidded to a stop in the kitchen. The first thing that hit me was the stench. Rotten food and something else, something more rancid. Vomit, maybe?

"Get the hell out of my house!" Maryanne screeched.

Ronan didn't even blink. He simply pointed to the paperwork on the counter. "Sign, and we'll be out of your hair."

Maryanne whirled on me. "What do you think you're doing, you sniveling little bitch? You think you can suck me dry all these years and not pay me back? You owe me."

Ronan moved so fast he was nothing but a blur. One second, he was on the opposite side of the kitchen, and the next, he was between me and my mother. "You don't talk to her. You don't even look at her."

Maryanne scoffed. "Should've known the innocence thing was nothing but an act. You've been spreading your legs for every guy that looks your way."

"One more word..." Ronan's voice held a tremor that vibrated throughout the room.

Maryanne's eyes widened, and she went pale. "W-who are you?"

"You know," he growled. "You've always known. But still, you crossed us."

My brows furrowed. None of that made sense.

“S-she’s not one of you.”

“Shut up,” Colt snapped, striding into the room. “You’re a damned waste of space. Sign the papers, or I’ll make your life a living hell. You know I can do it.”

Rage flashed in Maryanne’s eyes, but there was fear there, too. She stomped over to the counter, scrawling her name across the page. “Take her.” Maryanne turned those hate-filled eyes on me. “But don’t you ever come back. You’re dead to me.”

I met her stare, not looking away. “Being dead to you would be sweet relief.”

A growl rumbled out of Ronan’s throat.

“What the fuck is all the racket?” Chuck bit out as he lumbered into the kitchen. He wore nothing but boxers and a dingy white T-shirt that was stained in several places.

My stomach roiled at just the sight of him.

His gaze sharpened as he took in the full kitchen. “What the hell is going on?”

“They’re taking Leighton,” Maryanne bit out.

Chuck instantly straightened. “The fuck they are. She’s ours.”

Everything in me cramped and twisted at that demand of ownership. I’d lived in fear for the past two years that one day, his comments and stares would turn to the darkest sort of action. I’d escaped him so far, but I knew time was running out.

Ronan studied the newcomer for less than a beat before he was prowling toward him. “She doesn’t belong to you. And if I find out you laid a finger on her, I’ll break every single one, and then I’ll remove your balls from your body.”

Chuck’s face went beet red. “You can’t come into my home and—”

“But it isn’t your home, is it?” Colt cut him off, moving with a silent grace and blocking Chuck’s view of me. “You’re a freeloading piece of shit that isn’t worth spit.”

Chuck charged forward, swinging out. I opened my mouth to yell, to warn Colt, but he didn’t need my warning. He ducked beneath Chuck’s punch and pulled his arm behind his back, forcing Chuck to his knees. “Stop. The only reason you’re still breathing is that Leighton didn’t want us to make a scene.”

“Let him go!” Maryanne shrieked as she ran forward.

Ronan shoved her back. “Don’t. This mess is your making. You don’t get to intervene.”

“Fuck off!” Chuck yelled as he struggled to break free. “She’s a damn cock tease, acting like she ain’t flaunting her shit in front of me.”

I shrank back as nausea rolled through me.

Colt moved with a speed that was almost too quick to clock. A snap filled the room and then Chuck’s screaming howl.

“My arm! You broke my fucking arm!”

Maryanne burst into angry tears. “Get out! Take the bitch and get out!”

Ronan grabbed the papers from the counter as Maryanne sank to her knees beside Chuck.

Colt’s arm was around me then, ushering me out of the house and down the steps. “Don’t look back,” he urged.

I didn’t. I’d gone numb. The kind of unfeeling state where your body buzzed with pins and needles.

Ronan opened the back door to the SUV. “I’ll drive.”

Colt helped me into the vehicle, and I moved on autopilot, scooting in. He got in behind me, slamming the door. “Go.”

My body trembled. “You broke his arm,” I whispered.

“He should’ve broken his fucking neck,” Ronan growled.

Colt cupped my cheek, turning me toward him. “Are you okay?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“Breathe with me, okay?”

I watched Colt’s chest rise and fall. It was only then that I realized my own breaths were rapid and out of control. I struggled to match mine to Colt’s. I wasn’t sure how long it took, but finally, my heart slowed.

“That’s it,” Colt said. His hazel eyes searched mine. “Did he hurt you?”

I shook my head. “Not like you think.” *Not yet.*

Colt’s arms came around me, pulling me to him. “He won’t touch you ever again.”

Colt’s chest rumbled with each word. Even though I knew the vibrations were rooted in fury, they were reassuring somehow. It should’ve felt weird to be comforted by someone who was basically a stranger now. But the truth was, Colt could never be a stranger.

So, I let myself be lulled into the warmth of his hold. And Colt didn’t let go. I didn’t even bother asking where we were going. I didn’t care, just as

long as it was away from my living nightmare.

The only sound was the hum of the SUV's engine and the beat of Colt's heart. Eventually, the vehicle slowed to a stop.

"We're here," Ronan said, voice gruff.

I forced myself to sit up, feeling the loss of Colt's arms instantly. I blinked as I took in the sight out of the front windshield. We'd come to a stop on the tarmac of what looked like a small airport. And there sat a sleek private plane with two men standing outside, almost looking as if they were guarding it.

I glanced at Colt. "Are we taking that?"

He nodded. "We should be back home in a few hours this way."

My gaze went from Colt to the plane and back again. "Are you rich?" The inappropriate question was out of my mouth before I could stop it.

Ronan snorted. "You have no idea..."

I FOLLOWED Colt up the stairs to the plane, Ronan trailing behind us and carrying Briar, who was hissing up a storm. My gaze jumped all over the place as I stepped inside the cabin. The interior was all dark wood and white leather. It could've been a club's lounge and not a plane.

"Welcome back, Mr. Carrington," a feminine voice purred.

My head jerked in the direction of the sound. A woman in a tight uniform and made up to perfection sent Colt a sultry smile. I had the instant urge to deck her.

I swallowed back the instinct. What the hell was wrong with me lately?

"Thank you, Heather." Colt's voice was cold politeness, and the woman's smile faltered a fraction. He moved further into the plane as she stepped aside, leading us toward two loveseats that faced each other.

As Heather took me in, her face scrunched. "Miss." There was no politeness in her tone, but as she locked eyes on Ronan, her expression brightened. "Mr. O'Connor. Welcome."

Her gaze roamed over his body in an intimate way that had that same feral urge to warn her off flaring inside me. My fingers curled into my palms, my nails pressing into the skin there.

Ronan simply grunted and kept moving.

"Do you want a window seat or aisle?" Colt asked, bringing my focus back to him.

"Either's fine. Whatever you don't want."

"LeeLee..." he warned, pinning me with his stare.

I fought the urge to squirm. "Window." The single word was quiet, but it made a smile stretch across Colt's face as he gestured me in. I settled

there and took in the darkening sky outside. I'd be able to lose myself in the stars like this.

Ronan moved to the opposite bench, settling Briar's carrier in the seat and securing it with the seat belt. Something about the gesture tugged at my heart. That this gruff guy would go the extra step to make sure my beloved cat was safe. Briar rewarded him with a loud hiss.

Ronan's brows rose. "Not exactly the cuddly type, I take it."

I winced. "I guess not."

Colt lowered himself into the seat next to me. "She's LeeLee's defender."

A hint of a grin pulled at Ronan's mouth as he sat across from us. It was the first hint of warmth I'd seen from him, and it froze me to the spot. Something about the action made that gold in his eyes shine brighter, hypnotizing me.

"I guess tiny claws are better than none," he muttered.

That had me looking down at Colt's arm to where Briar had scratched him. I blinked a few times, looking to his other arm when I didn't see any marks on the one closer to me. But there were none on that one either. The only evidence of the scrapes was a faint smudge of blood.

"Your arm, the scratches are gone."

Colt stiffened next to me. "Told you they weren't bad."

"But you were bleeding. Now they're just...gone."

Colt lowered his arm so that it was out of my sight. "I can bleed a lot from just a little nick."

I opened my mouth to ask something else, but Heather stepped forward. "Can I get you anything once we're in the air?"

She only had eyes for Ronan and Colt, and I fought the urge to growl at her.

Colt turned to me. "Do you want something to drink or eat?"

The idea of putting any food in my stomach had nausea rolling through me. "Do you have any ginger ale?"

Heather's lips pressed together in a hard line, but she nodded. "Of course." Her eyes quickly traveled back to Colt. "What about you, Mr. Carrington? Anything *at all* that I could get you?"

Ronan coughed, but it sounded more like a strangled laugh.

Colt glared at his friend. "A bottle of water would be good."

"Of course. Still or sparkling?"

“Still, please.”

“And you, Mr. O’Connor?”

Ronan’s eyes danced with humor. “I think I’m good.”

Heather hurried off to the front of the cabin as the plane began to move.

Ronan let his laughter free then.

“Shut up,” Colt hissed.

“Pretty sure she would lie out on that table there and let you fuck her while we watched.”

My cheeks heated at Ronan’s words.

“Ronan,” Colt growled.

“Sorry, it’s just hilarious. She gets worse and worse.”

“It’s not like I’m the only one. Don’t think I missed her propositioning you for a quickie in the back bedroom on the way out here,” Colt muttered.

My stomach roiled as my gaze shot to Ronan. His eyes locked with mine, something unreadable in them. “You know I’m not interested. Not sure she’s gotten that through her head, though.”

Colt sighed. “I’m going to have to let her go.”

He sounded like he felt guilty, but I couldn’t help but feel a sense of relief about it. I hated thinking about her making a move on either of the guys sitting with me.

“Please fasten your seat belts for takeoff,” a different female voice said over the intercom.

I fumbled for my seat belt, my hands shaking as I struggled to get the clasp done. Colt reached over, deftly securing it for me.

“Thanks,” I mumbled.

The plane picked up speed, and soon we were hurtling into the air. The higher we climbed, the darker the sky grew. In a matter of minutes, we were swimming in a sea of stars.

“Your drinks,” Heather snapped.

Her voice jerked me out of my daze, and heat hit my cheeks as I realized Colt and Ronan were both staring at me intently. As if I needed any more evidence that I didn’t belong in their world.

“Thank you,” I said, as Heather shoved my ginger ale at me.

Colt frowned at her as he took the much more gently offered water.

I took a sip of the soda and then set it in the cupholder in my arm rest. Toying with the end of the seat belt, I glanced at Colt. “Where are we going?”

Ronan chuckled. “Shit. You don’t even know where you’re going to live, do you?”

I shrugged. “It didn’t really matter as long as it was away from where I was.”

The humor slid from Ronan’s face, and Colt gripped the bottle of water tighter.

Crap. I was putting my foot in my mouth every two seconds around these two. I cleared my throat. “I just meant, I’m glad to have a fresh start.” I cast a look at Colt. “I know you lived most of the year on the East Coast. Was it Maine?”

Colt shoved the bottle into his cupholder. “Rhode Island.” He seemed to force the tension from his face. “Our place is right on the beach. You’ll love it.”

I glanced at Ronan. “You live there, too?”

He nodded. “We all do.”

My heart thudded a little harder. “All?”

The corner of Ronan’s mouth kicked up. “The four of us. Me, Colt, Dash, and Trace.”

“They’re your other friends?” I asked, anxiety pooling in my stomach.

“More like brothers,” Colt said.

My fingers dug into the seat. So much for a quiet life with Colt and his dad. I was going to be surrounded by four guys I knew almost nothing about when the only being I was used to talking to was my cat.

HEATHER SENT Ronan a sultry look as he headed down the aisle of the plane. I had the urge to bare my teeth at her. God, I needed to get a grip.

I followed Ronan out of the plane and into the night air and pulled deep breaths of it into my lungs. There was a hint of salt that told me we were near the ocean.

Colt pressed a hand to my back as we descended the plane steps. “It’s not a far drive now.”

My stomach twisted, nerves setting in. “And your dad’s okay with this?”

Colt’s footsteps faltered as we hit the pavement, an unreadable expression passing over his face. “My dad passed away last year.”

My chest constricted, and I grabbed Colt’s hand on instinct. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

Of course, I hadn’t. Because Maryanne had ripped away every support system I’d had in my life. And Colt and his father had been at the top of the list.

Colt squeezed my hand. “I know.” His throat worked as he swallowed. “Dad always loved you.”

I wrapped my arms around Colt and held on tight. “I wish I could’ve been there for you.” It was a club no one wanted to be a member of, but it helped when you had someone who had walked the path before you.

A million questions filled my head. I wanted to know what happened and how. I wanted to know who was taking care of Colt. But now wasn’t the time. So, I just held on.

Colt inhaled deeply, breathing me in as he nuzzled my neck.

“Colt,” Ronan snapped.

Colt’s hold on me tightened.

Ronan moved in closer. “Get yourself under control.”

Colt’s grip on me loosened, and he stepped back. But when he did, I gasped.

“Your eyes.”

It wasn’t the subtle flecks of glowing gold from this afternoon. His eyes were on fire. A liquid gold swirled through them.

He blinked a few times, and the gold was gone.

“What was that?” I leaned in as if I were going to examine Colt’s irises.

He quickly stepped back. “Probably just tired.”

Being tired didn’t make your eyes glow like some lost treasure, but something in his expression had me biting back further questions.

Briar let out a loud meow.

Ronan glanced down at the carrier in his hand. “We need to get going. Even the hellcat thinks so.”

I sent a stern look in Ronan’s direction. “Don’t call her a hellcat.”

He arched a brow. “She attacked the damn bars when I picked her up. She’d scratch my eyes out if she could.”

I winced. “She’s just getting used to all the new people.”

“Sure,” he muttered. “Let’s just get her home before I lose a finger.”

Home.

Would this place be that for me? It had been so long since I’d felt that kind of peace. But somewhere deep, a flicker of hope lit.

Ronan tossed Colt a set of keys with a meaningful look. “You drive.”

Colt nodded, striding toward the blacked-out Range Rover without a word. His departure stung. But I understood how talking about his father’s death could’ve left him raw.

“Come on,” Ronan urged, glancing around the small airport.

It was then that I saw four more people in black—three men and one woman. Two waited by the SUV while the others seemed to patrol the area. I didn’t miss the weapons holstered on their hips.

“Who are they?” I whispered.

Ronan glanced at them. “Security.”

“For who?”

His gaze darted away from me. “Colt’s got a lot of money. There are people who would like to take that from him.”

What was I walking into? I'd had no sense of Colt and his dad being wealthy when they spent their summers with us in Michigan. Their cottage was nice, but it wasn't like it was a mansion. A heaviness settled over me as I wondered if I'd ever known my best friend as well as I thought I had.

One member of the security team opened the back passenger door. He nodded at me. "Ma'am."

I'd never been called ma'am in my life. Could you even be a ma'am when you were seventeen?

Ronan slid Briar's carrier onto the floorboard and then stepped back, motioning me in.

"Thank you," I said softly.

He nodded, waiting for me to get in. When I did, he shut the door. The sound ricocheted around the dark night. It was so final. As if I just now realized my entire life was about to change.

Ronan climbed into the front passenger seat. "Let's roll."

Two security guys were already in another blacked-out Range Rover in front of us, and I saw the other two climbing into the one behind us. Had they gotten a deal on all these fancy cars?

Colt still didn't say a word, but his hands gripped the steering wheel as he put the SUV in drive.

"You gonna be able to handle this?" Ronan asked so softly I could barely make out the words.

Colt jerked his head in a nod. "I just need to acclimate. I'll be used to things in a few days."

Used to what? My being here? It made sense that my presence would screw with things. Especially if he was used to living with his friends.

Guilt pricked at me. "I'll stay out of your hair, I promise. You won't even know I'm here."

I was good at being invisible.

Colt's gaze jerked to the rearview mirror, and I swore gold flashed again. "Why would I want you out of my hair?"

I linked my fingers in an intricate twist. "I just...you said you needed time to acclimate. You shouldn't have to do anything differently because I'm here. I get that you have your life. I don't want to mess with that."

Colt's back teeth ground together. "You don't mess with anything. I've wished you lived with us from the day we met. I want you in my life. Every part of it."

My heart squeezed. “Oh.”

The corner of his mouth kicked up. “Yeah, oh.”

Ronan simply grunted. I wasn’t so sure he felt the same.

I studied the brooding guy. There was no denying he was beautiful. Even the scar on his brow somehow made him more so. But there was something deeper. A pain rooted in the hidden parts of himself that I recognized because it lived in me, too.

Ronan turned as if he could feel my stare. Our gazes locked, and suddenly, I couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. That pain was there now, in those rich amber eyes. Gold glowed in their depths, and I knew without a shadow of a doubt, there were places we were undeniably the same.

We hit a speed bump, and the moment was broken. Ronan turned quickly around, his gaze locked on the road ahead, muttering something under his breath.

I shifted in my seat. My skin felt itchy, too tight for my body. I pressed the window button, welcoming in a cool breeze. It was so different from the heat and humidity of early fall in Louisiana. The thought had me realizing just how far I’d come.

“Could I borrow one of your phones?”

Colt glanced in the rearview mirror. “What do you need it for?”

“I have to tell my boss I left. She’ll worry if I don’t show up.”

Colt’s expression softened, and he handed me his device.

It was too late to call, but I typed out a text to the number I had memorized, letting Betsy know where I was and that I’d call when I’d saved up enough money for a phone of my own. I stared down at the screen, tugging my lip between my teeth. She’d still worry, but hopefully, this would lessen it.

Colt guided the SUV through winding roads. The houses surrounding us got larger and larger until he pulled to a stop in front of large iron gates. A guard stepped out of a little gatehouse, and Colt rolled down his window.

The man nodded at him. “Welcome home, sir.”

“Thanks. Everything quiet?”

“No issues while you were away.”

“Good.”

The gates opened, and I couldn’t help but lean forward. There was no house in sight yet. Just a wall of trees and shrubs.

Colt eased us forward, and we followed the drive. As he took another curve, I sucked in a sharp breath.

The house in front of me was unlike anything I'd ever seen. Because it wasn't a house at all. It was more like a palace. Floor after floor of white brick with massive windows on every story that were flanked by black shutters. Immaculate landscaping surrounded it with grounds that seemed to go on forever. It was the most beautiful home I'd ever seen, and one thing was for certain.

I didn't belong here.

RONAN JUMPED out of the SUV and opened my door. But I couldn't stop staring at the house. Everything about it felt daunting.

He sent me a grin. "You'll get used to it."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," I mumbled. I was used to my junkyard safe haven and ramen noodles made on a camp stove. The only reason my little home had been mice free was thanks to Briar.

I pulled her carrier out of the vehicle. Even she was quiet, as if she were taking it all in, too.

Colt beamed at me as he rounded the Range Rover. "Welcome to The Nest."

The Nest. In some ways, the name fit. The house was perched on top of a rise that meant, in the daylight, you'd be able to see everywhere around you. But in others, it didn't fit at all. A nest was cozy, simple. This place was anything but.

A man strode out of the house, a wide smile on his face. "Colt, Ronan, welcome home. We've missed you." There was something about the man that immediately set me at ease. The curve of his mouth instantly read as genuine, and the lines around his eyes told me he made the motion often. "And you must be Leighton. I've heard so much about you. Welcome to The Nest."

"Thank you." My words came out as more of a hoarse whisper.

"This is Baldwin. He runs the ship around here," Colt explained.

Baldwin's smile widened. "Anything you need, just come to me. I'll need to know all your food and beverage preferences so that we can get

them stocked. Colton told me you're partial to mac and cheese and Twix bars, so we've got those."

I sent Colt a look, and his cheeks reddened.

"I remembered those from when we were little," he explained.

A small smile pulled at my lips. "I still love them." Mac and cheese from a box was a treat I allowed myself once a month, and my stomach rumbled at the thought.

Baldwin straightened. "And this must be Briar. I've got belongings set up for her in your suite. Will you allow me to get her settled?" He took the carrier from me as he glanced at the guys. "Dash and Trace are in the lounge."

Colt's lips thinned. "I was hoping they'd be asleep."

My fingers curled into my palms, nails digging in. It was two in the morning. I'd hoped that everyone would be asleep so that I could space out meeting each new person.

Ronan snorted. "Like they were gonna miss this."

Colt sent me a sidelong look. "You up for meeting them tonight?"

My mind screamed no, but instead, I nodded. "Sure."

Baldwin sent me an encouraging smile. "I'll get the princess settled and leave a snack in your room in case you're hungry. I've stocked the bathroom with toiletries, but if you have specific requests, just let me know."

I wanted to laugh. Specific requests? I used the showers at school and their harsh, stinging soap so that I didn't have to risk showering at home. Whatever Baldwin had left in the bathroom, I was sure it was a million times better than what I was used to.

"Thank you."

He nodded and headed into the house.

Colt pressed a hand into my back, urging me forward. "I'll give you the full tour tomorrow. I'm sure you're exhausted."

"Okay." I was beyond tired, but I had a feeling sleep would be hard to come by.

Ronan strode inside, and we followed. The entryway was massive, with marble floors that bled into dark hardwoods and a double staircase that had me shrinking in on myself. Every extravagant detail made me feel more out of place. I tried to let my vision go hazy then, to not see all the beauty around me.

I focused on Ronan's broad back, the T-shirt that pulled taut across an expanse of muscle, as he walked down a hallway. It wasn't long before he stepped through a doorway and into a room that had the tension in my muscles easing a bit.

It had a cozy feel I wasn't expecting. Plush carpet and dark woodwork with countless built-in bookshelves. But the shelves themselves didn't house books. There were what looked like video games, board games, puzzles, and who knew what else. Massive bean bags were scattered around the space, and the largest television I'd ever seen sat opposite an enormous sectional that resembled a cloud.

On that sectional sat two guys. My gaze stuttered over them, freezing and drawing closer. The first one lounged back on the sofa, one ankle crossed over his knee. There was nothing welcoming in his demeanor, yet I couldn't help but stare.

He was probably the most beautiful human being I'd ever seen. Black hair was shorn close to his head on the sides and longer up top. My hand itched to feel the buzzed sides prickle against my palm. His face was all angular perfection, with a sharp jaw and cheekbones. But it was the eyes that did me in.

Violet orbs that seemed to swirl in deepening shades as he took me in. But that gaze was filled with nothing but judgment and cold disinterest.

The guy next to him leaned forward, bringing my attention to him. His sandy brown hair lay in an artful disarray that had me wanting to tame it with my fingers. Deep blue eyes were framed by black glasses that gave him a sexy professor sort of look. As he moved, his tee pulled tight across a muscled chest.

He grinned at me, and my stomach instantly tightened with a pull somewhere deep.

"Whoa. You're gorgeous," the guy mumbled.

Colt stepped forward and smacked him upside the head. "Quit it."

Heat hit the guy's cheeks, but he shrugged. "It's the truth."

Colt shook his head. "This is Dash. You can ignore him."

"Hi," I said, so quietly I wasn't sure he'd even heard me.

Dash's expression instantly softened. "Glad you're here."

Warmth hit my chest. It was the first time since I'd stepped out of that SUV that I actually felt welcome.

Violet eyes scoffed, and Colt sent a look of warning in his direction.
“Trace...”

The guy wasn't cowed. “They're going to eat her alive.”

Dash sent a hard elbow into his ribs. “You're not helping.”

“Don't you think she deserves a warning that she's walking into the lion's den?”

I hated how Trace talked about me, as if I weren't even here. But I hated even more that he was probably right. This world of wealth and power was one I knew nothing about. I was sure it could be brutal and vicious. But he didn't know I had a superpower.

I was invisible.

“SHUT UP,” Colt clipped at Trace.

He shoved to his feet, glaring at his friend. “You’re making a huge mistake. And you won’t realize just how badly you’ve fucked up until it’s too late.”

Trace turned and stalked out of the room before Colt could respond.

Dash smiled. It was the kind of smile that was easy and warm. “That went better than I thought.”

I turned to Colt. “Maybe this was a mistake.”

“No.” He grabbed my hand and squeezed. “That wasn’t about Trace not wanting you here. He’s just...worried. Our world isn’t always an easy one.”

I was sure that was true. With great privilege came a whole new set of risks.

I glanced at Ronan, who’d been silent through the whole exchange. And I couldn’t help but wonder if he was on Trace’s side when it came to me. His gaze bored into me, but I couldn’t read what was behind those eyes. It was as if he’d lowered some sort of wall, and I was on the outside.

“Come on,” Colt said. “I’ll take you to your room so you can get some sleep.”

I worried the side of my lip but moved to follow him.

“See you tomorrow,” Dash called.

I glanced over my shoulder. Part of me wanted to run back to Dash, to drown in his warmth and kindness. Instead, I just nodded, unable to get any words out.

As I followed Colt out of the room, I could feel Ronan’s eyes on me, but I was too scared to look in his direction. I didn’t want to risk seeing his

displeasure at my presence here.

Once we were in the hallway, Colt waited for me to catch up to him. “Don’t let Trace get to you. He’s surly on a good day.”

“I don’t want to make him uncomfortable in his own home.”

“You’re not, I promise. He’s just got some baggage, and it’s coloring things now.”

I wanted to press, curious about the guy with the haunting violet eyes. But I didn’t. I wouldn’t invade his privacy that way. Instead, I asked another question. “What about Ronan? Does he want me here?”

Colt sighed as he climbed the stairs. “He wants you here, but he also doesn’t think it’s safe.”

My steps slowed. “Are you in the mafia?”

The question slipped out before I could stop it, but it was the only thing that made sense. The bodyguards, the crazy security measures, the wealth.

A laugh burst out of Colt. “The mafia?”

My cheeks heated. “All this talk about what’s safe, the men in black, what am I supposed to think?”

Colt’s smile faltered. “We’re not in the mafia. But our lives do come with risks. Living with us, you’ll be exposed to that...”

My gaze narrowed on Colt’s face, trying to read between the lines.

“But we’ll keep you safe.” Shadows flitted across his eyes. “You weren’t safe at home.”

I shivered at that. Safe with Maryanne and Chuck was the last thing I was. Whatever the risks were here, at least I wasn’t dealing with them. “Thank you. I’m not sure why you did it, but thank you.”

Colt’s breathing grew labored, as if he were struggling to keep himself in check. “I may not have been there when you needed me before, but I’m here now. You’re not alone anymore.”

The simple words made tears burn the backs of my eyes. “Okay.” It was all I could seem to get out.

Colt forced a smile. “Come on. I want to show you your room. I remembered you used to like blue, so that’s what I told the designer.”

“Designer?”

“We had to get the place ready for you.” Colt came to a stop at a set of double doors. He opened one and ushered me inside.

I gaped at the sight that greeted me. This wasn’t a bedroom. It was more like an apartment. There was a sitting area around a massive window that

included a window seat. The study area had a desk, complete with a laptop and a fancy chair. Bookcases filled with an array of textbooks and novels flanked it.

The entire space felt like a peaceful beach. Light blue walls that were calming. A massive bed that looked as if it were made from driftwood. Bedding that looked so fluffy, it might be able to swallow me whole. A fancy cat tree was positioned next to another window, and Briar sat atop it, bathing her paws.

“Come on,” Colt urged, leading me toward another door. “This is your bathroom.”

We stepped inside, and I gasped. The entire space was white and gray marble, with gleaming silver fixtures. There was a shower large enough to fit a football team. I couldn’t even count all the spray nozzles in the enclosure. There were two sinks with huge mirrors above them and a station that looked like it was for getting ready.

But the item that stole my breath was the bathtub. How long had it been since I’d taken a bath? I didn’t even know. I hadn’t been able to let my guard down like that in years.

I stepped forward, the gorgeous porcelain pulling me in. The massive tub sat in front of a huge picture window that I had a feeling had a view of the water. My fingers ghosted over the rim as my chest clenched.

“Do you like it?” Colt asked.

I turned slowly toward him, the pressure behind my eyes building. “This is too much,” I croaked.

Colt grinned. “We’re just getting started.”

A SMALL SMILE played at my lips. Sixteen. I didn't know why, but it had always felt like it would be a monumental birthday. As if the years before this were just playing at being a teenager, but now, I really was one.

Grief hit me hard and fast as I heard my father's voice in my mind from when I was a little girl. "Sweet sixteen's a big one. We're gonna throw you one epic party when that day comes."

There would be no epic party. No balloons or presents or anything like that. But maybe, just maybe, Mom would be a little kinder to me today.

I slung my backpack over my shoulder and started downstairs. I heard movement in the kitchen. Mom was hunched over the stove, boiling water for oatmeal.

"Morning," I greeted.

She turned slowly, her eyes bloodshot and unfocused. "Quit yelling."

I hadn't. Far from it. I knew now to keep my voice low. Not to make my presence known. To disappear.

"Sorry," I whispered.

"Get home right after school. You need to clean. This place is disgusting."

She wasn't wrong there. But it was a mess of her own making. Hers and Chuck's. A shiver ran through me at the thought of her boyfriend.

"I can't." The words were as soft as I could make them and still be audible.

Heat hit my mom's face. "What did you say?"

"I can't. Betsy from the diner is taking me out for ice cream."

Mom scoffed. "Why the hell would she waste her time doing that?"

My heart cracked a little more. No matter how bad things got with Mom, I always held on to a little piece of hope that things would get better. That somehow, I'd become worthy of her love.

"Because it's my birthday."

I wasn't sure what I expected from my mom once she had that knowledge. Maybe a flicker of guilt? A softening? But there was none of either.

Her body went rigid, as hard as stone. "What?"

"It's my birthday."

My mom lunged, grabbing my arm and yanking me hard. My backpack went flying. "Where is it?" she screamed.

She jerked my arm, frantically searching.

"Stop! Where's what?"

"Don't lie to me, you little bitch. Where is it?" She kicked out, her foot knocking my legs out from under me.

I hit the linoleum floor with a force that knocked the wind out of me. Pain bloomed across my cheek, and I tasted blood.

My mom tore at my shirt, exposing my back, and then she shrieked. "You're not special. You're nothing!"

The world spun around me, but I could just make out my mom reaching for the pot of boiling water. She dumped it on my exposed back.

I screamed. Screamed with everything I had in me. The pain spread through me like wildfire.

"You're of the Devil! I'll burn it out of you!" She pressed the metal pot into my back.

Blessed darkness took me then.

I jerked upright, sweat coating my skin, as I struggled to suck in a breath. It had been a while since I'd had one of these nightmares. Since the terror had gotten a hold of me in such an intense way.

It made sense that it would come on now. Change shook loose the things you locked away.

The thick comforter that had felt so luxurious when I'd crawled into bed now felt stifling. Like a heated straitjacket. Throwing back the covers, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and sat up.

Briar let out a sleepy meow.

I scratched behind her ear. "I'm okay."

But I wasn't. My hand trembled as I stroked her. I needed air. To remember that I was free.

I pushed to my feet and crossed to the doors. My hand hovered over the handle, still shaking. I didn't want to run into anyone. But it was still dark. I had to hope everyone else would be fast asleep.

Before I could second-guess myself, I pulled open the door. Stepping into the hallway, I waited. My ears strained for any signs of movement. There was nothing.

My bare feet padded along the smooth wood floor as I made my way to the stairs. I paused again, listening. Still nothing.

I hurried down the stairs before I could change my mind. But then I had no idea where I was going. Deciding to head in the opposite direction of the front door, I meandered through an immaculate living room and then some sort of conservatory with endless windows. Finally, my eyes locked on a set of doors.

I reached for one, only to find it locked. My fingers felt around in the darkness, and I finally found the latch. Unlocking it, I stepped outside.

The cold night air was a balm to my skin. Those nightmares made me feel like I was burning alive all over again, and it took hours to put out the flames.

I walked out onto a stone patio. The moon lit enough of my surroundings that I could take it all in. Elaborate gardens on either side of me, an artful stone patio, and an enormous pool. But it was the view beyond it that had me moving forward.

Beyond the immaculate grass lay a rocky shore and past that, a sea of dark, swirling water. Something about that ocean called to me. It was as if it were so similar to the darkness that lived in me. It was comforting somehow.

My feet sank into the damp grass as I headed toward the rocks. Closer and closer to that swirling darkness.

I clambered up a boulder and sat. The colder surface of the rock helped that burning in my skin even more. I breathed deep, closing my eyes. I was safe. I chanted it over and over in my mind as the salt air filled my lungs. She couldn't hurt me anymore. I was free.

A harsh voice cut through the silence, through my peace. "What the hell do you think you're doing out here?"

I LURCHED TO MY FEET, whirling around. The move was less than graceful and had me suddenly tipping backward. My arms windmilled as panic gripped me.

Ronan surged forward, grabbing my arm to right me.

The moment his skin touched mine, visions filled my mind. A younger version of Ronan covered in gashes and his eye swollen shut. Pain filled his expression as he shifted on a cot. Then an entirely different vision. He looked as he did now, but his face was different somehow. There was none of the pain and darkness that lived in his eyes currently. They were filled with peace, joy...love. And he was looking at me.

The crash of the waves against the rocks had me jerking out of the bizarre imaginings. Ronan dropped my hand as though he'd been burned, but he was looking at me with...wonder. He quickly covered it. "What are you doing out here?"

I swallowed hard. "I didn't know it wasn't allowed. I couldn't sleep."

There was a flicker of something in Ronan's amber eyes. "It's not safe."

My brows rose at that. "The property's gated. There are security guards. And this is the ritziest neighborhood I've ever seen." It's not like I'd risk walking up on a drug deal. At least, not one where I'd be in danger of being shot.

A muscle in Ronan's jaw ticked. "It's dark. The waves crash high. You could fall and be carried out to sea without anyone noticing. Hell, you almost were."

I stiffened at that. "I almost fell because you snuck up on me and scared me half to death."

There was no apology in Ronan's expression. "You should be more aware of your surroundings."

I let out a huff. "Excuse me if I don't have ninja training."

Ronan's jaw clenched harder. "This is going to be a disaster," he mumbled.

Pain lanced my chest. I barely knew the guy in front of me. So, why did it hurt so badly that he didn't want me here? "If you didn't want me to move in with you guys, why did you come with Colt to find me?"

Ronan sighed. "I didn't say I didn't want you here."

"You don't always need words to communicate things."

He looked out at the water. "I don't think you're prepared for life in this world. You don't have what it'll take to defend yourself. I think Colt wanted you here, but at the end of the day, that was a selfish move."

I shifted to follow his gaze, careful not to send myself flying again. "It's not like my life in Louisiana was peachy. I know how to defend myself." I was an expert at avoidance and evasion.

Ronan shook his head. "It's different."

"How?" I pushed.

He turned toward me, his gaze sweeping over my face. I swore I could feel all the places it touched. "It's hard to explain. The people here...they're playing with a whole different set of weapons."

I saw it then. The worry deep in his eyes. "You're worried about me."

He shrugged.

"You don't even know me."

The corner of his mouth kicked up. "Colt talks about you all the time. I think I've heard every story about your summers growing up together at least a dozen times. When you tried to keep the pet frog but it escaped, and your mom screamed her head off. How you made that epic fort in the woods that was your hideout from your parents. The time you fell in the creek and Colt had to jump in after you."

A vise tightened around my chest. There were a million of those memories. But the through line was the same. Colt always had my back.

"I missed him," I whispered.

"I bet. And he missed you. So much that he brought you here, even though it was risky as hell."

I still didn't understand that. As far as I could tell, Colt's world was beyond sheltered. "It doesn't matter because I'm here now."

That ticking along Ronan's jaw was back. "You're right. There's no putting the cork back in the bottle."

"When did you move in with the Carringtons?" There were a million questions I had about Ronan. He was this living, breathing mystery standing just inches away.

He stiffened. "Why?"

I shrugged. "You know all these things about me, and I know nothing about you."

Ronan studied me for a moment and then nodded. "When I was thirteen."

"Why?" It was a simple question. I'd never heard about a friend named Ronan when Colt had spent his summers in Michigan.

Ronan's fingers flexed and clenched. "You're not the only one who has a parent that's a monster."

Bile swirled in my stomach as the memory of my earlier vision swam in my mind. Had I somehow intuited that Ronan had a past similar to my own when I'd seen the familiar pain etched in his face? Was my imagination simply taking that leap?

"I'm sorry."

"Don't need your pity," he clipped.

"It's not pity," I said. "It's understanding."

Ronan turned. His amber eyes glowed gold in the darkness. A million different silent things passed between us. It eased something in me to simply stand in silence with someone who understood.

Ronan's head jerked in the opposite direction, and he shifted in front of me in a flash. "Get back in the house."

I struggled to clamber up the rocks. "Why? What's wrong?"

"Now, Leighton," he growled.

"Should I get someone?"

"No," he barked. His gaze flicked back to me for a brief moment. "Don't come out here alone. Not ever again."

I BLINKED against the sunlight as I sat on the edge of my bed. The brightness burned my eyes. But I guessed that was what happened when you only got about an hour of sleep.

Rest had escaped me when I'd returned to my room. I'd perched in my window seat, searching for Ronan, but he'd melted into the night without leaving any sign behind.

A soft knock sounded on my door.

"Come in." My voice had a rasp to it that couldn't be disguised.

The door opened, and Colt stepped inside. He frowned as he took in my face. "Didn't sleep well?"

I winced. *That obvious?* "Need to get used to the new sounds, I guess."

He nodded, but concern etched itself into his face. "Baldwin's about to put out the breakfast spread. Come eat with us?"

My stomach growled loudly.

Colt chuckled. "I'm taking that as a yes."

I pressed my palm to my stomach. "Breakfast would be good. I just need to get changed first."

I glanced down at my attire and blushed. My flannel pajama bottoms were threadbare and too short. My oversized T-shirt had several holes. I'd never been embarrassed about my pajamas before because no one ever saw them. And Colt wasn't the only one. I'd had an entire conversation with Ronan while wearing these.

Hurrying to my feet, I scurried to my bag, pulling out my best jeans and blouse. "I'll just change in the bathroom."

I disappeared inside before Colt could say a thing. I made quick work of brushing my teeth and washing my face. The face wash had a fancy French name, and it smelled like roses. I followed it up with some lotion that had the same sweet-smelling scent.

I studied myself in the mirror, taking in my reflection. My red hair hung in long waves around my face. My green eyes stood out against my pale skin, and the dusting of freckles across my nose did, too. I didn't have any makeup to disguise the dark circles under my eyes, so this would have to do.

In a matter of minutes, I was dressed and ready to go. My hand hovered over the doorknob. "Don't be a chicken," I hissed to myself.

I pressed down on the handle and opened the door.

Colt stood from the edge of my bed, swallowing as he took me in. "You look beautiful."

Heat hit my cheeks. "Thanks." I looked down at myself. "Is this okay? I wasn't sure what we were doing today."

"It's perfect," Colt assured me.

Briar let out a meow, stretching on top of her cat tower.

Colt grinned, edging a bit closer to the feline. "Looks like she's settling in."

Briar hissed and struck out with her claws.

He jerked his hand back. "I guess we're not at the friendship stage yet."

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing. "It might take her a bit." I nuzzled her face. "Be good. I'll be back in a bit."

I hurried to make my bed before we left.

"You don't have to do that. We have staff."

I shook my head. "They don't need to clean up after me. I can take care of my space." I always had.

Colt's brows furrowed, but he didn't argue.

When I was done, he led me out of my bedroom and shut the door behind us so Briar wouldn't escape. "I thought we could go shopping after breakfast."

"Shopping?"

"You'll need new clothes for school and stuff. Baldwin's picking up your uniforms today, but you'll need other things."

My fingers wove together, clenching, as we descended the stairs. "I need to get a job first. Save up some money. Do you know of any

restaurants in town that might be hiring?”

Colt's steps faltered. "I didn't expect you to pay for this stuff."

I halted. "You can't just buy me things."

"Why not? What good is money if you don't spend it?"

"Colt...you're already letting me stay in your house. You got me out of Louisiana. That's enough." He'd saved me. And I'd never forget it as long as I lived.

His jaw tightened. "I brought you into this world. The least I can do is get you some armor."

My stomach clenched. The kids at his school would no doubt expect designer clothes and fancy cars. I swallowed hard. "I can deal with people looking down on me. I'm used to it."

Colt took my hand. "Please, LeeLee. Let me do this for you. I'm not trying to be an ass, but getting you a new wardrobe is nothing to me. Not even a drop in the ocean."

I worried the corner of my lip.

"Please."

Those pleading eyes broke me.

"Okay, but nothing too crazy."

He grinned. "Deal."

We hurried down the stairs and into a dining room. The table was covered with more food than I could ever have imagined: scrambled eggs, toast, grits, fresh fruit, waffles, pancakes, and pastries. There were also pitchers of juice, milk, water, and what I assumed was coffee.

Three sets of eyes came to me. I instantly surveyed Ronan, looking for any signs of injury. But he didn't even look tired. I blinked a few times, suddenly wondering if I'd dreamt the events of last night.

"Hey, Leighton," Dash greeted with a wide smile. "How'd you sleep?"

His hair was a little wild this morning. Waves that were arranged in a haphazard display. It only added to his charm.

"Okay," I answered.

"She's lying," Trace said, leaning back in his chair, balancing on the back legs. He ran a thumb along his bottom lip and toyed with his lip ring. I couldn't help but track the movement with my eyes, wondering what it felt like.

"Trace..." Colt warned.

“What? It’s obvious. Either that or she’s been toking this morning, and she doesn’t seem the type.”

I fought the urge to curl in on myself.

Ronan kicked at the chair, sending it toppling over.

Trace scrambled, managing to land on his feet instead of his ass. “What the hell, man?”

Ronan picked up a croissant, taking a bite. “I slipped.”

Dash snorted, and Trace glared at him, then he turned that glare back to Ronan. “You drinking the Kool-Aid now? I thought you saw reason.”

He shrugged. “She’s here. Cat’s out of the bag. There’s no reason to be an asshole.”

“You’re all making a huge mistake.” Trace’s cold, violet eyes cut to me as he stalked out of the dining room.

“Well, that was fun,” Dash muttered.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly.

Colt squeezed my hand. “You have nothing to be sorry about. He’s just dealing with some stuff.”

But it wasn’t *stuff* that was throwing Trace off. It was me.

Dash pulled out a chair next to him. “Colt’s right. You’re not the first person he’s been this way with. When I joined the, uh, group, he thought I was going to ruin everything, too. You get used to his prickly ass.”

The tension in my chest eased a bit as I took the seat Dash offered. “I guess I’m in good company, then?”

His smile widened. “The best. What do you want to eat? Baldwin wasn’t sure what your favorites were.”

“Everything looks amazing.” My stomach growled again.

Dash laughed and heaped a serving of each dish onto my plate.

“Whoa,” I argued. “I can’t eat all of that.”

His gaze roamed over me. “You need to eat more.”

I ducked my gaze. I knew what he saw. Someone who was just a little too skinny. But that was what happened when you worked yourself to the bone and didn’t have a whole lot of money for food.

Everyone went silent.

Dash dipped his head closer to my ear. “Sorry, I just—I want to make sure you’re not hungry.”

I licked my lips, forcing a smile. “I don’t think that will be possible in this house.”

Dash's grin was back. "Not when Baldwin's around."

Ronan loaded his own plate with more food than I thought it would be possible to consume. "What's the plan for the day?"

"I'm taking LeeLee shopping," Colt said, as he grabbed a waffle.

Ronan stilled, a serving spoon full of eggs halfway to his plate. "You sure that's a good idea?"

"I'll take her somewhere off the beaten path."

Dash sent him a sidelong look. "Just make sure it's somewhere the anchors don't go," he mumbled.

Anchors? What the heck was that? Colt had assured me that he wasn't in the mafia, but what if he was in a gang? Was I about to get myself in the middle of some turf war? It would be just my luck to get out from under Maryanne's torture only to end up gutted in some modern-day Capulets and Montagues war...

BREAKFAST WAS MOSTLY polite conversation after that. Dash peppered me with random questions about my favorite things. His easygoing demeanor was a balm compared to the intensity of the rest of the guys. Even Colt had that edge. It was just tempered by the fact that I knew him so well.

Baldwin stepped into the dining room and inclined his head toward Colt. "Your car has been brought around."

I looked up at him. "Thank you so much for breakfast. It was amazing."

My stomach was practically full to bursting.

He gave me a kind smile. "I'm so glad you liked it."

"You ready?" Colt asked.

I nodded, pushing back my chair. I grabbed my plate, wanting to take it to the kitchen, but Baldwin shook his head. "I'll deal with that. You go have fun with Colton."

My lips twitched at the use of Colt's full name. There was something so endearing about it. "I'm happy to clean up after myself."

Baldwin's expression gentled. "I get immense pleasure in taking care of all my chicks. Don't rob me of that."

"Well, thank you."

"Come on, we've got lots of places to stop," Colt said.

There was a giddiness to Colt that almost made him look like a little boy, even though he was six foot four inches of solid muscle now. The image had me fighting a smile.

I glanced at Dash and Ronan, unsure of what to say. Dash had his usual easy grin. "I should come with you."

Colt shook his head, sending Dash a mischievous smile. “Sorry, no room in the car.”

Dash rolled his eyes. “You’re an ass. You know that, right?”

Colt chuckled and slapped Dash on the back. “We’ll see you in a few hours.”

Concern creased Ronan’s face. “Not too long.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Colt grumbled.

He took my hand and pulled me out of the room. “If we don’t leave now, we’ll never get out of here.”

He moved quickly through the maze that was his mansion, and before I knew it, we were out the door and stepping into the sunshine. My steps faltered as I took in the vehicle waiting for us. It looked like something out of a Batman or Bond movie. “What is that?”

Colt chuckled, running his hand over the curved hood of the sleek sports car. “My baby.”

My gaze lifted to him in question.

“A Bugatti La Voiture Noire.”

I wouldn’t have been able to repeat the name if I tried. “If I get in that contraption, you’re not going to kill us, right?”

Colt laughed harder. “I promise to only go ten over the speed limit.”

I eyed him suspiciously.

He held up a hand as if he were taking an oath. “I swear.”

“I’ll call the cops on you myself.”

“Deal.” Colt opened the door for me.

I didn’t even want to climb in, worried I’d somehow damage the leather.

“It’s just a car, LeeLee.”

I swallowed and slid inside. The seats were buttery soft, and the interior looked like it belonged in a rocket.

Colt got behind the wheel and started her up. The engine roared and then settled into a purr that sent vibrations through my seat. “Here we go.”

He expertly handled the manual transmission as if he’d been doing it all his life. By the time we reached the gates, they were already opening. The guard probably heard the car from there.

Colt kept his promise, maintaining a reasonable speed. He wove through neighborhoods with breathtaking mansions and then more typical homes, and finally, we passed through a quaint downtown area with shops and restaurants.

“It’s so cute.” Each shingled building looked weathered by the sea air in a way that only increased their appeal.

“We’ll show you around this weekend.”

His words suddenly reminded me that it was a weekday. “Shouldn’t you be at school?”

He shrugged. “Called out for a few days. The rest of the guys will go, though.”

“Can you do that?” There were a million more silent questions in that one sentence.

Colt seemed to read every single one. “Baldwin’s my guardian, according to the state.”

“And he’ll just let you take off whenever you want?”

Colt grinned. “He trusts me not to take it too far.”

This was a whole different world. One I wasn’t sure I’d ever entirely understand.

Colt turned onto what looked like a two-lane highway. “There’s an outdoor mall not too far from here. They should have everything we need.”

My stomach cramped at the word *everything*. “You promised not to go crazy.”

“I won’t.”

Somehow, I didn’t believe a word.

COLT TOOK my hand in his as we wound our way through the sea of shops. It wasn't like any mall I'd ever been to. Each store had names that belonged in Vogue, not on mall signage.

"There it is," Colt said, leading me toward the massive Saks Fifth Avenue sign.

"Isn't this a little much? Maybe we could go somewhere a little less..."

I wasn't even sure how to finish that statement.

He squeezed my hand. "This is just what we need."

A security guard held the door open for us as we passed.

"Thank you," I said, but wasn't sure my voice carried to his ears.

Colt wound through the store, dragging me behind him, until we reached a lounge area with a reception desk. A woman sat behind it, and she brightened the moment she saw Colt and me. "Well, look what the cat dragged in."

He chuckled. "Hey, Carly. How are you?"

"You know, same ole, same ole. What sort of trouble are we getting into today?"

Jealousy pricked at me. It wasn't that she was being particularly flirtatious, but there was a comfortable intimacy between her and Colt that told me they were friends. The kind of friendship I'd been robbed of all these years.

He tugged me forward. "This is Leighton. She'll need an entire new wardrobe. Everything to outfit her for Prep life—loungewear, eveningwear, the works."

The woman turned to me, and I braced for judgment. Instead, I found kindness in her eyes. “Nice to meet you, Leighton. I’m Carly. We are going to have so much fun today.”

I sent Colt a stern look. “You promised we wouldn’t go overboard. This is overboard.”

“Trust me, LeeLee. You’ll need all of this.”

“He’s right,” Carly said. “You’ll be swimming with sharks at Castle Prep. You’ll need all the protection you can get.”

I swallowed, trying to clear the dryness in my throat. “Maybe I should go to public school,” I mumbled. I’d fit in way better there.

Carly laughed. “I like you.”

Colt gave my hand one last squeeze. “I promise we can stop at that cupcake place on the way out.”

I brightened at that. “Then let’s get this over with.”

Colt sent Carly a grin. “Baked goods bribery works every time.”

“Those cupcakes are amazing. It’ll be worth it,” she said. “Come on, Leighton. I’ll go as quickly as possible.”

Carly led me back to an area with only two dressing rooms. There were couches and a bar area with an array of pastries laid out. “Can I get you something to drink or eat while we work?”

I shook my head. “I’m good. Thank you.”

“Okay, we’ll start with your measurements.” She pulled a measuring tape from her pocket. “This way, I can send you more items as the seasons progress, and you won’t have to come in unless you want to.”

A wave of nausea rolled through me. This was too much. The last thing I wanted was to be a drain on Colt.

Concern filled Carly’s face. “Are you okay?”

“It’s too much,” I whispered.

Her expression instantly gentled. “You weren’t raised in their world, were you?”

I shook my head. “I knew Colt growing up, but I never knew he lived like...*this*.”

“I bet it’s overwhelming. It’s like an entirely different plane of existence.”

I nodded. “I can’t imagine ever being used to it.”

“If it helps, I refill the guys’ wardrobes at least once a quarter. They don’t even blink. It might sound bad, but this is nothing to them, and it’ll

make Colt feel good to take care of you. It gives him a sense of purpose.”

I took a deep breath. Maybe I could shift this in my mind. I was giving Colt something he needed. “Okay.”

Carly smiled. “Let’s do this.”

She took a million different measurements, inputting them into an app on her phone. When she wrapped the tape around my chest, she frowned. “We need some new bras. This one doesn’t come close to fitting you.”

I winced. It was the best one I had, but the straps cut into my shoulders, and the cups were definitely tight.

“I’ll get those, and we’ll start with casual wear. That will give me a base to go on.”

“Thank you. For everything.”

She reached out and squeezed my arm. “Us girls need to stick together.”

I followed her out of the dressing rooms to wait with Colt. I didn’t want to give my mind time to turn on me while I waited alone.

Colt’s head came up the second we were back. “Everything okay?”

Carly nodded. “I’m pulling our first set of items, but Leighton can wait with you while I do that.”

Colt grinned and patted the seat next to him. “You need a snack? Shopping always makes me hungry.”

I laughed. “I ate eggs, pancakes, and pastries an hour ago. I think I’m good.”

He shrugged. “Just don’t want you getting hangry on me.”

“I don’t think we’ll be in danger of that for at least another twelve hours.”

“Fair.” The smile slipped from Colt’s face as his head jerked up.

Three guys were making their way toward us. They looked about our age. All three were eerily beautiful, with flawless, pale skin and impeccably styled hair. But their eyes were dark in a way that sent a shiver through me.

Colt was on his feet in a flash, and I got to mine on instinct.

The guy in the front with dark brown hair and a cocky swagger grinned at my friend. “Colt, heard you were here with a female.”

Colt stepped in front of me as the guys got closer. “Damien.”

The guy’s grin only widened. “Protective, are we?” He made an exaggerated show of sniffing the air. As he did so, his eyes widened, and his nostrils flared. “Well, who do we have here? I heard rumors about a little lost one but didn’t imagine she’d smell quite this sweet.”

Colt gave Damien a hard shove. “Back up.”

Damien’s eyes narrowed as the two guys behind him stiffened. “Careful, pup. You don’t want to start something you can’t finish.”

Colt’s hands fisted at his sides. “I think that’s you. You’re already on probation. One more slip and you’re done for good.”

Damien’s mouth curled in a snarl. “It won’t last for long. And the Laurents always pay their debts.”

One of Damien’s friends grabbed his arm. “Your dad’ll be pissed.”

“Listen to Lucien, there. Wouldn’t want Daddy to get upset,” Colt goaded.

Damien snarled, and his second friend stepped in front of him. “Not here.”

Carly bustled over, her arms loaded with clothing. She didn’t hesitate to get between Colt and Damien, a huge smile plastered on her face. “I’m so sorry, gentlemen, but this place is closed to the public. But I’d be happy to make you an appointment for a later time.”

She blinked up at Damien with innocent doe eyes so convincing, you’d truly think she had no idea what she’d walked into. But even in the few minutes I’d known Carly, I knew there was no way she was so clueless.

Damien snarled at her. “We don’t stoop to *department stores*.”

He said it as if it were a dirty word. Then his gaze cut to me, a smile spreading across his face. “I can’t wait to be properly acquainted.”

Colt surged forward, but I caught the back of his T-shirt, pulling him back the best I could. “Don’t,” I whispered.

Damien laughed, then made a motion for his minions to follow him as he left.

The moment he was out of sight, Colt turned to me. “We need to leave. Now.”

“GO THROUGH THE BACK EXIT. He’ll be waiting for you at the front of the store,” Carly said, herding us toward the back of the store. “I’ve got Leighton’s measurements, so I’ll just send everything to the house. If there’s anything she doesn’t like, just send it back.”

“Thanks, Carly.” Colt grabbed my hand as he shoved open the door.

I didn’t even have time to say goodbye to Carly or thank her because we were already moving across the parking lot. I had no idea where we were. This place was a maze. But Colt did. In less than two minutes, I spotted the sports car.

Colt beeped the locks and opened my door. “Get in.”

I slipped inside as fast as I could, my heart hammering against my ribs. What the hell was going on?

Colt was behind the wheel in a flash, turning the engine over. He slipped in a wireless earbud and hit something on his phone. Then he was tearing out of the space. Gone was his promise of keeping to a reasonable speed.

I hurried to put on my seat belt and braced myself against the dashboard.

“We’ve got a problem,” Colt clipped.

I couldn’t hear the other side of the conversation and had no idea who he was even speaking to.

“Damien, Lucien, and Caspian showed.”

There was a pause as he listened to the person on the other end of the line.

“He had me tracked. You know the mall isn’t exactly his scene.”

More silence.

“We’re already out. On our way home now. Meet us there. We need to make a plan. He scented her.”

I scrunched up my nose at that. Was Damien some freak with a smelling fetish or something?

“I know,” Colt growled. “Just meet me at home.”

He took his hand off the gear stick to end the call, and then it was back. He didn’t say a word. Didn’t even look at me. His gaze alternated from the road ahead to the rearview mirror.

“Who are they?” I asked. My voice wasn’t loud, but it sounded like a cannon in the quiet space.

A muscle along Colt’s jaw ticked. “People who shouldn’t be breathing your air.”

“I’m going to need a little more information than that.”

Colt’s knuckles bleached white as he gripped the wheel tighter. “Someone we’re at odds with. Damien’s family and mine have never gotten along. We got them into trouble not that long ago, and Damien holds a grudge. If you ever see him or his friends, you run in the opposite direction.”

“Am I going to see him?” I squeaked.

Colt’s jaw worked back and forth. “They go to Castle Prep, too.”

I gaped at him.

“You’ll be safe on campus. Just don’t let him get you alone. But the guys will stick close. Don’t worry.”

I stared at Colt. “You think he’ll hurt me.” It wasn’t a question, but it still begged for an answer.

A hardness slipped into Colt’s eyes. “I know he will.”

I swallowed hard. I was starting to see what Ronan and Trace meant. Maybe home would’ve been safer. At least there I knew what to expect.

But the moment the thought entered my mind, I squashed it. It would mean I didn’t have Colt back in my life or Dash’s kind smiles or Ronan’s prickly protection. It would mean I was no longer free.

A series of three blacked-out Range Rovers tore toward us. The moment Colt saw them, he slowed. One pulled a U-turn in front of us, the other two behind us. We were encircled like we were part of a presidential motorcade.

“Your security?” I asked.

Colt nodded, a little of the tension easing from his muscles. “Just a precaution.”

Who the hell was Damien, really? Because this wasn’t the type of reaction for someone who was just a high school bully. My stomach twisted.

We were silent for the rest of the drive, and when we pulled to a stop outside of The Nest, my door was yanked open, and Ronan was pulling me out of the car.

“Are you okay? Did he touch you?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine.”

Ronan let out a low growl. “You’re not *fine*.”

I snapped my mouth closed. I was, but arguing right now wouldn’t get me anywhere.

Trace’s violet gaze, brighter than normal, swept over me as if checking for injury. “This is why you never should’ve brought her here. You just painted a massive target on her back.”

Colt glared at him. “Like I could leave her where she was? That place was a ticking time bomb, and she was completely unprotected.”

“You should’ve put her up in a safe house far away from here,” Trace snapped. “But you’re too damn selfish. Always so used to getting everything you want.”

Colt lunged for Trace.

Ronan cursed as he grabbed for Colt while Dash got hold of Trace’s shirt and yanked him out of the path. A whole lot of yelling ensued.

An ache took root in my chest. I was the cause of this. My presence was tearing them apart. I slowly backed away toward the house.

The door was already open. As soon as I was inside, I headed for the stairs, taking them two at a time. By the time I reached my room, the tears were falling. Tears because I had to face the truth. I was destined never to belong anywhere.

I LEANED back in my window seat, watching the waves crash against the rocky shore. The sound of it permeated the windows of my room, just enough to bring a morsel of comfort. But my heart still ached. As if someone had taken a mallet to it and then just walked away.

A soft knock sounded on my door. I didn't want to answer. But it had been hours since I'd escaped up here. I hadn't answered the first two knocks that had come, and I knew if I kept that up, someone would just barge in.

"Come in." I didn't bother looking at who was there. It didn't really matter. I wasn't sure any of them really *wanted* me here.

Briar let out a hiss from her cat tower as soft footfalls sounded on the floor.

I kept my gaze on the water.

Someone sat opposite me on the window seat.

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed sandy brown hair that was a little wild. Of course, they'd send Dash. Sending him away would be like kicking a puppy.

"You okay?" he asked softly. When I didn't answer, he pushed on. "That was dumb. Of course, you're not okay. None of this is your fault. Colt feels guilty as hell. Trace does, too, in his own way. All everyone wants is for you to be safe, but we just can't agree on the best way to make that happen."

Dash sucked in a breath after finishing his diatribe. "Sorry you got hurt."

I turned to take him in. He'd changed out of his uniform and was now in a white tee and gray joggers. The cotton of the shirt did nothing to disguise

the muscled chest beneath it. It was a beautiful juxtaposition to the boyishly handsome features of his face.

“I want to go home,” I said honestly.

Dash’s brows pulled together. “It didn’t sound like home was that awesome of a place.”

“Not to Louisiana and Maryanne. I want Michigan and my dad.” Tears burned the backs of my eyes. “I want a time and a place that doesn’t even exist anymore, but I’m so homesick for it, I feel like my heart’s being torn in two.”

Pain flashed across Dash’s face. “It’s the worst kind of homesickness there is.”

Something about his expression told me he understood far better than I could’ve guessed.

“I miss home every day, but when things are hard...the ache becomes a living, breathing thing.”

My fingers dug into my calves. “Why can’t you go home?”

Dash gave me a sad smile. “It’s a time and place that doesn’t exist anymore.”

“What happened?”

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

“You don’t have to tell me,” I hurried to say. The last thing I wanted to do was cause someone else pain.

Dash shook his head. “It’s okay. I just don’t talk about it a lot. My family was killed a couple of years ago. Colt’s dad took me in after that. I could’ve kept my family’s house, but it wasn’t a home anymore, so I let it go.”

Pain streaked through my chest. He’d lost everyone in a single moment. “I’m so sorry.” I reached out, linking my fingers with his.

The moment our hands connected, I was lost to a sea of visions. A younger version of Dash, tears streaking down his face as Colt pulled him into a hard hug. Then, a much older version of him with gray hair and a lined face. He wrapped his arms around a woman. “*Love you even more today, Leighton.*”

I jerked out of the images assailing me. Dash’s gaze was locked on our joined hands as if right there lay all the riches in the world. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask if he’d somehow seen it, too.

Dash shook his head, forcing his gaze to my face. "I'm sorry you lost your dad. Colt's told me a lot about him. He sounds amazing."

I let out a shaky breath. "He was. My best friend. I just want...I don't know...to find some steady ground again. I thought maybe I could get that here, but..."

"Now, you're not so sure."

I nodded. "I don't want to force my presence on anyone."

"You're not," Dash argued.

I huffed out a laugh, but there was no humor in it. "Pretty sure Trace would disagree with you."

"Trace wants you here. He just doesn't want to let himself admit it."

I found that hard to believe.

Dash sighed and squeezed my hand. "Then hear me. *I* want you here. I love that you're in our house, that we'll get to spend every day with you. I can't wait to get to know you better. The big things and the little ones. Like how you eat the crust off your toast first."

I blushed at the idea of Dash paying so close attention to me at breakfast. "The inside's the best part. I like to eat it last."

He chuckled. "Delayed gratification. I like it."

I lifted my gaze to him. "Thanks for being so kind to me."

"Always. Just promise me you'll give it time before you decide to run off and leave us all in the dust."

I slumped back against the wall. "Am I that easy to read?"

The corner of his mouth kicked up. "Maybe just a little." The amusement slipped from his expression. "I don't want to lose you before we've even had a chance to truly know you. It's going to take time to find our rhythm, but we'll get there. I promise."

The earnestness in his plea had my walls crumbling. "Okay."

Dash squeezed my hand and then released it. "Good."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a necklace. It looked like a locket of sorts. Gold metal with an etched design on the front. "This is for you."

"Dash...that looks expensive."

He shook his head. "It's been in my family for generations. There are some herbs inside that help with protection. It'll make me feel better if you wear it."

"Herbs for protection..."

Dash shrugged. “I’ve got a thing for plants. My mom did, too. They have so many properties that go beyond beauty, healing of the mind and body and warding off things.”

He leaned forward, looping the necklace around my neck and fastening the clasp. “This is something I can do to keep you safe.”

I didn’t really believe that simple herbs would keep Damien from bothering me, but if it made Dash feel better, I wouldn’t argue. “Okay. Thank you. It’s beautiful.”

He leaned back, our eyes locking as my breath hitched. It was as if some invisible energy was pulling us together.

Dash’s eyes widened, and he hurried to stand. “I gotta go. But just promise me you’ll never take it off.”

“Okay, I promise.”

He studied me as if making sure I was telling the truth. “Thank you. I don’t think I could handle if anything happened to you.”

MY HANDS SKIMMED over the uniform. It fit me shockingly well. I wasn't sure how they'd gotten the sizes down. Maybe Carly had given them to Colt.

I'd never worn a uniform in my life, but I'd expected scratchy fabric and boxy cuts. Not for Castle Preparatory Academy, what I'd learned was the official name of the school thanks to my blazer. The shirt was the softest cotton I'd ever felt. The kilt was lined with satin so that the wool didn't touch my skin. And the blazer cocooned around me perfectly.

I surveyed myself in the mirror. I'd used the curling iron Baldwin had left in my bathroom to add some waves to my red hair. My heart squeezed as I took it in. The same hair as my father. The same deep green eyes, too. I really had no similarities to my mother, and I was grateful for that.

I'd done my best with the makeup. Adding mascara to my lashes and a bit of lip gloss. I hadn't wanted to mess with the rest and end up looking like someone out of the eighties.

Taking a deep breath, I grabbed the leather backpack that had been delivered alongside a heap of clothes I didn't even want to think about. One thing at a time.

I gave Briar a quick scratch behind the ear and headed out the door. When I reached the stairs, I could hear voices coming from the dining room. My stomach flipped. I couldn't imagine what school with the guys would be like. The idea of handling this new world on my own was overwhelming, but I didn't want to be a burden to them, either.

As I stepped into the dining room, all conversation stopped, and four pairs of eyes locked on me. I swallowed hard as I took in each expression.

They were all different. A muscle in Ronan's cheek fluttered as his gaze bored into me. Colt's expression was full of longing and maybe a bit pissed off. Dash wore a grin a mile wide as his blue eyes sparkled. The anger in Trace's violet irises sparked and danced as his fingers tightened around his fork in a vise grip.

I glanced down at myself. Had I done something wrong? Was I wearing the wrong outfit or something? "Is this okay?" I asked softly.

Colt was on his feet in a flash. "You look gorgeous, LeeLee. That's the only reason we're staring."

Trace and Ronan quickly averted their eyes, but Dash just kept smiling. "Too gorgeous for your own good."

Heat hit my cheeks, and I quickly slid into the open chair between Colt and Dash, dropping my bag to the floor next to me. Dash quickly loaded my plate with eggs, a biscuit, and some fruit. My stomach pitched as I looked at all the food, unsure if I'd be able to eat anything at all.

Dash reached over and squeezed my thigh. "Everything's going to be okay."

Trace muttered something under his breath, downing the rest of his coffee.

My gaze pulled to him as if he held some sort of magnetic force. There was a darkness swirling around him. It was more than just his hair and the tattoos covering his hands. That darkness was *in* him. More than that, a deep sadness.

"What?" he snapped.

I jumped. Anger quickly followed on the heels of his startling. I hated the idea of Trace knowing he affected me so deeply. "I was just wondering why you're so sad."

The guys stilled as Trace stiffened. "I'm not *sad*. I'm annoyed as hell that Colt dumped you on us, and now, we're going to have to watch your back every second of the day."

I straightened in my chair, fighting the blush that rose to my cheeks. "Good thing I'm not counting on you to watch my back. If I were, I'm sure there'd be a knife in it."

Ronan tried to disguise his laugh with a cough.

Trace shot a scowl at him, then turned that angry look in my direction. "You think you won't need me, but you will."

I shrugged. "I'm not asking you for anything. But you seem determined to make yourself miserable, so have fun with that."

Dash choked as he took a sip of juice. "God, does she have you pegged."

"Okay, I think that's enough. Let's just have a nice breakfast," Colt said.

I took a big bite of my biscuit. I didn't want Trace to think that he had any effect on my appetite.

Colt turned to me, sliding over a piece of paper. "This is your class schedule. They tried to match it to the classes you were in at your old school as much as possible."

My brows pulled together. "How'd you know what classes I was in there?"

Colt grinned. "I've got my ways."

"Stalkery ways," I mumbled.

Ronan snorted.

"You can ride with me to school, and I'll take you home, but we don't have a ton of classes together," Colt informed me.

Trace's head snapped up. "That's a bad idea. Give her one of the Rovers to take."

I didn't bother telling him I didn't even have a driver's license.

Colt's gaze narrowed on Trace. "I'm not letting her show up at school alone."

"You'll just make her a target," Trace growled.

"I can walk. Or I'll get a bike after I get a job," I hurried to say.

Ronan shook his head. "It's too far to walk or ride your bike."

I worried the corner of my lip. "Is there a bus I can take?"

Dash laid his hand over mine. "You can ride with us. Don't listen to Trace. It's not a big deal."

Trace shoved back from the table. "This is going to be a nightmare."

THE RIDE to school was beyond awkward. I was shoved in the middle of the back seat between Dash and Ronan. Their large frames made me feel just a bit claustrophobic. It didn't help that their scents swirled around me.

I'd never really been aware of how guys smelled before. But Dash was a mixture of pine and cedar. Ronan reminded me of a dewy morning after a hard rain. That didn't even make sense. But I wanted to roll around in both of them.

Trace sat in the front passenger seat, staring at the road and pretending none of the rest of us existed. Colt seemed lost in his own world as we drove.

Each moment of silence twisted my stomach tighter. By the time we pulled through massive iron gates, I wanted to throw up.

As the school came into view, my jaw dropped. Castle Prep was an appropriate name. The main building looked exactly like the castle from a fairy tale, complete with turrets. It was only missing the moat and drawbridge.

I gaped at the cars in the parking lot. BMWs, Mercedes, Porsches, and even a Ferrari. This was not my public school, that was for sure.

Colt pulled into a parking spot with Carrington printed on a sign in front of it. His hands tightened on the wheel. "Stick close today."

The guys all nodded except for Trace, who shoved open the door and jumped out of the SUV.

"This is going well," Ronan muttered.

"I'll be fine," I assured them. "I'm good at fading into the background."

Ronan stared at me. "The last thing that you are is invisible."

RONAN WAS WRONG. Usually, I was invisible. It was my superpower. Being able to fade into the background of any situation. Sometimes it felt as if my entire form was translucent. But that was what kept me safe.

Kids at my old school didn't talk to me. Teachers didn't even call on me. I ate lunch alone in the library or outside under a tree when the weather was nice. I turned in my homework on time and aced my tests, but I didn't stick in my teachers' minds.

That wasn't going to be the case here. But it wasn't because of me. It was because of the guys that surrounded me as we made our way toward the large stone building. Every set of eyes traveled to them.

I understood the fascination. They were enchanting. Not just their masculine beauty, but a certain energy they had humming below the surface.

There was one thing I knew for sure: If I wanted to survive Castle Prep, I needed away from them.

Trace and Ronan glared at every single person whose gaze dipped to me. People instantly averted their eyes, but it wouldn't dampen their curiosity.

Colt dipped his head. "I'll show you your locker and then take you to your homeroom."

I nodded quickly. "Maybe it could just be you?"

A look of hurt passed over Dash's face.

"I just—I think people will stare less if I'm only with one of you."

"She's right," Ronan said. "Come on."

Trace instantly peeled off as if relieved he was off the hook.

Dash hesitated, but Ronan grabbed the back of his blazer and tugged him away.

I breathed a little easier as many of the students' focus followed them.

"It'll be okay," Colt whispered. "After the first week, people will get used to you."

I wasn't sure that would be the case if I stuck around the guys.

Colt showed me to my locker, which had an electronic lock that he programmed with a code for me. "Your books are already in here." He grabbed two textbooks and slid them into my backpack. "That will cover you until lunch."

"Thanks." I could feel eyes on us, and the sensation had me wanting to crawl out of my skin.

Colt led me down the hallway, keeping me against the fancy lockers and blocking anyone from potentially knocking into me. Eventually, he slowed outside a classroom. "This is your homeroom. I'll meet you after to show you to your next class."

I quickly shook my head. "I'll be fine."

"Lee—"

"No." The single word was quiet but firm. "I appreciate everything you're trying to do for me, but I'll do better if I can just start to blend in."

"You don't know where you're going."

My mouth curved. "I'll figure it out. I'm not completely helpless."

Colt pulled me into a hard hug, and I ignored the twinge of pain along my ribs, which were still healing. "You're the strongest person I know."

"I'll be okay. It's just school, right?"

He huffed out a breath as he released me, handing me a phone. "Text me if you need me. I put all the guys' numbers in your phone."

I shook my head. "This is too much."

"It's for your safety. Not having a cell phone is reckless."

I sighed. "Pushy."

He grinned. "You say pushy. I say charming."

I chuckled. "See you later."

A look of worry swept over Colt's face. "Later."

I hurried into homeroom and breathed a sigh of relief that I was one of the first people there. One girl sat in the front row, closest to the window. A guy sat in the back corner.

I took a seat in the second to last row, just off-center. I'd found that you didn't want the front or last rows. The front had the teacher's gaze automatically going to you. But the back was where the teacher looked for troublemakers. Near the back and just off-center was the invisible zone.

The chair next to me squeaked as someone sat. A guy with reddish-brown hair grinned at me as he slung his backpack on the floor. "Hey, you're Leighton, right?"

Crap. Had my presence already circled the gossip mill?

The guy seemed to sense my unease. "Ronan told me you were in my homeroom. I'm Connor. Welcome to Emerald Bay."

He held out a hand for a fist bump. I tentatively reached out my fist for a knuckle bump. I waited for one of those weird imagination-running-wild visions to hit, but nothing happened.

The breath whooshed out of my lungs in relief. "Nice to meet you."

"You, too. Bet it's crazy starting somewhere new your senior year, and it's not like Prep is your typical school experience."

I winced. "It's definitely different from public school."

Connor chuckled, and the sound was warm and comforting. "Understatement of the century. But I'll show you around if you need."

"Thanks. I really appreciate it."

Connor didn't seem to garner quite the same attention as the guys. Maybe I could have some real friends here. Just ones that weren't the center of everyone's focus.

More students piled into the room. A group of three girls entered. The girl at the front of the pack flicked her glossy, mahogany hair over one shoulder as she used the aisle as a runway. Her hips sashayed from side to side.

"That's Chloe, Grace, and Mimi. You might want to stay clear of them," Connor whispered.

"Not really my speed," I whispered back.

Chloe dropped into the seat two rows in front of me, making an exaggerated motion of crossing her long, tanned legs. Grace and Mimi took the seats on either side of her. Chloe laughed, leaning over to the Asian girl with flawless skin, and whispered.

As she did so, she revealed a tattoo of a compass on the back of her neck. I blinked, taking in the beautiful artwork. Something about it pulled at me.

“Quiet, please,” a man in a suit called as he dropped a stack of paperwork on his desk. “This isn’t social hour. I want silence for the next forty-five minutes. Sign the sheet on your way out to mark your attendance.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn’t going to make me stand up and introduce myself as the new student. My invisibility was safe for another hour.

I STAYED in my seat as the homeroom cleared out. Chloe scowled at a boy who dared cut in front of her as if her glare alone could set him on fire. Yep, I was steering clear of her.

“What class do you have next?” Connor asked.

I glanced down at the piece of paper. “English Lit.”

That was one I was looking forward to. It had always been my favorite subject.

Connor nodded. “That’s not far from here. I can walk you.”

“Maybe you could just point me in the right direction?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Sure. Turn right out of this classroom. Then another right. And the room will be on your left.”

“That sounds like even I won’t be able to screw it up with my horrible sense of direction.”

Connor shook his head, grinning. “Give me your phone.”

I reached into my bag and grabbed my cell, handing it to him.

As he leaned over to take it, his nostrils flared, and his eyes widened. “Whoa.”

My brows furrowed. “What’s wrong?”

He coughed, pulling back. “Nothing. You just, uh, smell really good.”

I blushed. “Uh, thanks.”

Connor focused on my phone, tapping in some information. “Now you have my number, in case you get lost. And I sent yours to my phone.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking the phone back and standing. “I really appreciate your help.”

“Anytime.”

I headed to the front of the classroom and printed my name on the sign-in sheet. The teacher didn't even look up.

Connor gave me a wave as he headed out, and I turned in the opposite direction. The halls were already emptying, and I picked up my pace. The last thing I wanted was to be late for my first real class.

Rounding the corner, I slammed into a massive form and was suddenly hurtling backward, arms windmilling. Just what I needed. I was going to knock myself unconscious on my first day.

LARGE HANDS SNAKED OUT FASTER than should've been possible, closing around mine and keeping me from cracking my head open on the tile. The moment his skin touched mine, I was assailed with images. The first was a young boy sitting alone in a treehouse. I could feel his sadness, the deep ache in his chest and longing for someone. Then it was replaced with an entirely different image. It was an older guy, maybe eighteen or so, with white-blond hair and gray eyes that turned silver as he gazed down at a girl. At me.

I blinked rapidly as I was righted, the guy from my vision morphing into the hulking form in front of me. The same height as Ronan, his shoulders were broad, and the blazer he wore did nothing to disguise the muscles beneath it.

The guy's nostrils flared, and his jaw clenched as those gray eyes turned to molten silver.

Crap. Crap. Crap. He was mad. So mad. And I got it. I'd crashed into him, practically knocking him over. If you could knock over a mountain.

"I-I'm so sorry. I wasn't watching where I was going. I didn't mean to crash into you. I should've been more careful. Sorry, again."

I started to dash around him, but the guy caught my elbow.

"Wait."

I cringed, slowly turning to face him, and braced for rage in his expression. Instead, I was greeted with...wonder?

"Are you okay? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

The guy's voice wrapped around me with each syllable. It was husky and rough, but there was a tenderness beneath that gave me the sudden urge

to cry.

“I’m fine. Just about to be late for my class.”

He released my elbow. “What class do you have?”

“English Lit,” I answered automatically, as if he had complete control over my reactions.

He grinned, and the effect was devastating. It made his whole face light up. “I’m in that class.”

“Oh.” What a genius response.

“Come on. I’ll walk you. Make sure there are no more collisions along the way.”

Embarrassment heated my insides. “Thanks,” I mumbled.

“I’m Declan,” the hulking giant said.

I swallowed, trying to clear the dryness in my throat. “Leighton.”

“You’re new here.”

It wasn’t a question, but it begged for an explanation. I wasn’t exactly sure how much to share, what Colt wanted public. So, I opted for a short answer. “Yeah, it’s my first day.”

Declan looked down at me as we approached a classroom door. “It’s gotta be tough starting somewhere new during your senior year.”

I shrugged. “It’s not so bad.”

Those silver eyes bored into mine. “I’m glad you’re here, Leighton.”

My name on his tongue was a caress and a promise all in one. And my stomach dipped and rolled.

This guy was lethal.

AS THE TEACHER talked animatedly about the themes emerging in the first chapters of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, I could feel eyes on me. It wasn’t the entire class, thank goodness. This was one set of eyes in particular. And I knew if I looked to my right, I’d see gray eyes staring back at me.

I forced myself to keep my gaze locked on the teacher or my notebook. Because every time my eyes collided with Declan’s, I wanted to drown in his stare. There was something warm and kind about it, accepting. Maybe I

was just inferring that because he'd offered to scan his notes from the first week of classes to catch me up and readily shared his syllabus.

After the drama I'd dealt with in my new home, Declan's easy welcome was a breath of fresh air. But I had no doubt he was the focus of many girls' attention, and I didn't need that kind of trouble.

"Please read chapters twenty through twenty-five for tomorrow's class," Ms. Piper said.

I winced. It looked like this school was going to be a bit more demanding than my last one. But if I could get good grades here, I'd have an even better shot at a decent scholarship.

"What class do you have next?" Declan asked, his gravelly voice skating over my skin in a pleasant shiver.

I pulled my schedule out of my notebook. "AP Bio."

He frowned. "I've got Calculus."

"Do you know where the bio class is?" I asked hopefully.

"I'll walk you," he said instantly as he stood.

One of Chloe's two minions, the one with blonde hair, glared daggers at me.

Crap. I did not need to be on mean-girl radar. "That's okay. Just point me in the right direction."

"No, I'll walk you," Declan said.

"That's okay. I'll figure it out." I grabbed my backpack and dashed from the room. One thing I had on my side was that I was smaller than Declan. I could slip through the crowd more easily than he could.

I felt like a jerk for ditching him. But I didn't want blondie setting her sights on me. I still wasn't sure if she was Mimi or Grace, but it didn't really matter. I wanted nothing to do with either of them.

Glancing down at my schedule, I read the room number. A-34. I looked around, breathing a sigh of relief when I realized I was already in the As. Fifty-two. Fifty. Forty-eight. Once I picked up the pattern, I hurried down the hall until I reached thirty-four.

Rushing inside, I found a seat in my usual invisible zone. But the teacher locked eyes on me immediately. He gave me a warm smile. "You must be Leighton Carmichael."

I swallowed and quickly nodded.

"I'm Mr. Greg. Welcome to Castle Prep. If you need help getting caught up, just let me know, and we can set up some tutoring sessions. The

curriculum here is quite strenuous, and I don't want you suffering in silence."

The blonde girl from earlier snickered as she entered the classroom. "Good luck."

"Mimi," Mr. Greg warned.

She gave her best innocent smile as she flounced into an open seat close to the front of the class.

I sank lower in my chair. Thankfully, the teacher didn't single me out any further. But my hand didn't stop moving the entire class. Mr. Greg moved through the material much quicker than my previous teacher, and I could tell I was behind. There were going to be some late nights of catching up in my future.

As I headed out of class, Mr. Greg nodded at me. "My door is always open."

"Thanks," I mumbled.

Glancing at my schedule, I realized it was lunch. I should've packed something. I nibbled on the corner of my lip as students all headed in the same direction.

The idea of braving any sort of cafeteria situation had dread pooling in my belly. I'd rather be hungry when I got home than deal with that. So, I headed in the opposite direction as everyone else. Maybe I could find the library and use the time to catch up in bio.

As I wound through the hallway, a voice raised above the crowd.

"LeeLee."

I cringed as people started to look my way. I could make a run for it, but Colt would just yell louder. My shoulders slumped, and I turned around.

Colt hurried toward me. "Where are you going? The dining hall's that way."

"I was thinking I'd use lunch to catch up on my bio reading. I'm really behind."

He frowned. "You need to eat."

"I had a big breakfast. I can eat when I get home."

Thankfully, the crowd had mostly dissipated now, and no one was here to overhear our conversation.

Colt's hand closed around mine. "Come on. I'll help you with bio tonight. But you need lunch."

I opened my mouth to argue, but when I took in Colt's expression, I knew it would do no use. "You're so damn stubborn," I grumbled.

He chuckled and tugged me down the hall. "Works to my advantage most of the time."

"It's annoying."

"You mean endearing."

I snorted. "Must be nice to be that delusional."

Colt kept hold of my hand as he led me into the dining hall. The moment we stepped inside, the din of conversation quieted, and every pair of eyes turned to us.

Panic gripped me. So much for my invisibility superpower.

“EVERYONE’S STARING,” I whispered.

Colt winced but didn’t let go of my hand. “Sorry about that. They’ll get used to seeing you with us. Promise.”

Every step twisted my stomach tighter. I could feel the gazes of everyone grating over my skin. I did my best to scan the room without making eye contact with anyone. The space itself was gorgeous, with dark wood paneling on the walls and tall, arched windows. The school had to be old, just brought into modern times with refurbishing.

The dining hall wasn’t like any sort of cafeteria I’d ever seen. There was an array of stations on the far side of the room. I could see one for sandwiches and paninis, sushi, Italian, and an elaborate salad bar. The options were endless. But the idea of putting food in my stomach was out of the realm of possibility.

Colt guided me through a sea of tables, and I tried to get a good look at each one. If there was one thing you could say about Castle Prep, it was that the students were beautiful. Almost unnaturally so. Maybe they’d all had cosmetic surgery. They could definitely afford it.

I caught sight of Connor at a table with guys who were all almost as large as Ronan and Declan. He grinned and waved. A few of the guys stared at me until a girl sitting in their midst elbowed one and smacked another on his chest.

There was a table of girls and guys who studied me as if I were a science project, whispering to one another as we passed.

My steps faltered as we neared a table with a familiar face. Damien grinned, leaning forward. “Hi, Leighton. It’s so good to see you again.”

He made an exaggerated show of pulling air into his nostrils and then reared back. Anger flashed in his eyes, and his head jerked in the direction of a table at the center of the room. His gaze locked on Dash.

I'd rarely seen Dash with anything but an easy smile on his face. I'd definitely never seen him angry. But right now, he was glaring daggers at Damien.

Colt dropped my hand and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "You've been warned," he growled in Damien's direction.

The guys sitting at his table stiffened as if braced for a fight.

Crap. That was just what I needed on my first day.

Colt guided me onward to that center table. Dash, Ronan, and Trace were already seated.

"That was the worst of it," Colt promised.

"Yeah, right," Trace muttered.

Ronan shot him a warning look, then turned back to me. "How was your morning?"

"Fine." I hurried to sit in the chair Dash pulled out.

Trace snorted. "You certainly know how to make an entrance. People won't shut up about you."

I scowled at him. "I wanted to keep a low profile, but your friend here wasn't having any of that."

Colt shrugged as he took the seat next to me. "Better to get it over with. The sooner people get used to LeeLee being one of us, the better."

Trace shook his head, his jaw working back and forth.

Dash cleared his throat. "How did you like your morning classes?"

"Who the hell likes their classes?" Ronan muttered.

Dash frowned. "I do."

"That's because you're a genius of freaky proportions," Colt shot back.

"I really liked my English class," I hurried to say before anyone could make Dash feel bad for enjoying school.

He brightened at that. "What are you guys reading?"

"*Crime and Punishment.*" I tapped my fingers against my knees. "I've got a lot of reading to catch up on, though."

"We can have an epic study session after school. Baldwin always makes the best snacks to keep us fueled up."

I smiled what felt like my first genuine smile of the day at Dash. He had the kindest heart. "Thank you."

Conversation around us quieted, and I was instantly on alert, scanning the room. I fought a groan as Chloe strode toward us, with Mimi and Grace on either side of her.

“Please tell me you guys aren’t friends with them.” Icy claws of dread dug into me as I realized that they could be dating these girls.

“I’m definitely not,” Dash mumbled.

Chloe tossed her glossy brown locks over one shoulder as her eyes narrowed on me. “Who are you?”

Ronan let out a low growl. “Don’t start, Chloe.”

She huffed out a breath. “I think I have a right to know who the strange girl is sitting with you.”

Nausea rolled through me. There was a proprietary ownership in those words.

Trace leaned back in his chair. “*You* don’t have rights to anything. It’d be good if you remembered that.”

Color hit her cheeks. “You know I do. And The Assembly wouldn’t be happy with you treating me with anything other than respect. Especially for this...trash. God, Trace. How low are you stooping these days? Her hair’s like a fire engine, and she doesn’t even know how to put on makeup.”

“Repeat that. I dare you.”

The words were growled with such ferocity I swore the table shook. My gaze jerked up to the owner of the voice. Declan’s gray eyes had gone molten silver, and he struggled to keep his breathing under control.

Chloe whirled. “D-Declan.”

His nostrils flared. “Repeat it.”

She shot a nervous look at her friends. “I was just stating the obvious.”

“Maybe if you’re delusional with a side of batshit crazy,” he snapped.

“Let’s not forget jealous,” Dash added helpfully.

“There’s definitely that,” Declan agreed.

Chloe’s face reddened further. “Fine, you’re protective of the new girl. Whatever.” She sent me a death glare. “But don’t forget that I’m the one you’ll all need.”

My brow furrowed at that. Need for what? A daily dose of bitchiness?

“Leave,” Declan barked.

The girls scurried off as fast as their legs would carry them.

Declan glanced down at me, his expression gentling. “You okay?”

Warmth spread through me. As much as I despised being the center of attention, I appreciated that he had my back. “Been through way worse than a bitchy airhead.”

He frowned, concern sweeping across his face.

Shit. That was the last thing I should’ve said. “I’m fine,” I hurried to add.

Declan jerked his head in a nod and then lowered himself into the empty chair at the head of the table.

“What are you doing?” Ronan gritted out.

Declan locked gazes with him. “I guess I’m eating lunch. Unless you’re going to try to steal that from me, too.”

“AU REVOIR, MES ÉLÈVES,” Ms. Carole said as we closed our textbooks.

The tension didn't leave my muscles as I waited for the classroom to empty. My eyes burned as I caught the sidelong looks in my direction.

A girl with wavy brown hair smiled at me as she shoved books into her bag. “I feel like I should clap or something.”

My brows furrowed. “Clap?”

“That scene at lunch. God, I've been waiting for someone to put Chloe and her bitch squad in their place for years.” Her smile spread. “I guess all it takes is the right girl to motivate those guys.”

My stomach flip-flopped. “I don't think it really had anything to do with me.”

She chuckled. “*Sure*. I'm Sam, by the way.”

“Leighton,” I said as I slid my notebook into my backpack.

“I know. Everyone does.”

I winced. So much for my plan of fading into the background.

“Don't worry,” she assured me. “The fascination will die down with time. It's just that the Lost Boys don't take girls under their wing.”

I straightened. “Lost Boys?”

“That's what everyone calls Colt, Ronan, Dash, and Trace.”

I wasn't sure I liked the moniker. On one hand, it was accurate. They'd formed their own sort of gang of misfits. But I hated the idea of anyone thinking of them as cast aside in any way.

“It's not a dig,” Sam promised. “They run this place. Everyone else is scared shitless of them. Well, everyone but Dec.”

“You mean Declan?”

She nodded.

I had a million questions I wanted to ask about him. The tension between Declan and Ronan had been clear as day all through lunch. But when I'd asked Colt about it on the way to history, he'd brushed me off with some blanket excuse.

"It doesn't seem like he gets along with the rest of the guys," I hedged.

Sam snorted. "Understatement of the century."

"Why?" I couldn't explain it, but there was this deep need in me to understand their dynamics.

Sam's mouth snapped shut, and her face closed down. "Not really my story to share."

But that meant there was one. Just one that I didn't have the right to know. And why would I? The truth was the only person I had a real relationship with was Colt.

I pushed to my feet and slung my bag over my shoulder. "Nice to meet you, Sam."

Her smile was back. "You, too. I have a feeling you're going to make things a lot more interesting around here."

I groaned. "Not really my goal."

She chuckled, but the sound died off. "Just keep your distance from Chloe. She might seem like a ditz, but she's more cunning than she appears."

Great. Life would've been easier if she was the airhead she appeared to be. "Thanks for the warning."

"Of course," she said as we headed out of the classroom.

"Sam," a deep voice bellowed.

She shrieked as thick arms closed around her, lifting her off the floor. The massive guy nuzzled her neck. "You're late."

Sam grinned as she shook her head. "Class has been out for approximately one minute."

Another guy leaned in and brushed his lips across hers. "We were worried."

She melted into his kiss. "I'm here now."

A third guy grunted. "Let's go."

"Guys, this is Leighton. Stop pawing at me and introduce yourselves."

I was openly gaping at the scene in front of me and quickly snapped my mouth closed. I'd heard of polyamorous relationships, but I'd never actually

seen one in action.

The guy who'd grunted narrowed his eyes on me. "James."

The kisser grinned at me. "Liam."

And the guy still holding Sam nodded at me respectfully. "Seán."

"Nice to meet you," I croaked. "I need to, uh, run. See you tomorrow, Sam."

"Bye," she called, then giggled as Seán lifted her in his arms.

I shook my head, moving in the direction of my locker. Emerald Bay was definitely a whole new world.

As I rounded the corner, my steps faltered. There was a greeting committee at my locker, but it wasn't exactly the welcoming kind.

Chloe's gaze locked on me instantly, and she stalked toward me. "Trash," she said, as if it were my name.

"Bitter," I greeted in return.

Her face hardened. "I know all about you. It didn't take any time at all."

Panic swept through me like a wildfire, but I did my best to keep my expression a blank mask.

When I didn't respond, Chloe's anger only grew. "Don't think they want you. You're a charity case, nothing more. Someone they *pity*. Never someone they'd want."

Acid followed on the heels of my panic. But I didn't let it show. "Are you done?"

Chloe's jaw slackened. If she expected me to break because of her words, she was in for a rude awakening. I'd been faced with someone far more vicious than she could ever be.

"Stay away from them," Chloe growled.

I simply sidestepped her and headed for my locker.

Chloe grabbed my arm, her fingernails biting through my blouse. "This is the only warning you'll get."

I jerked my arm free. "Noted."

"Come on," Mimi called. "She's not worth your time. You know they always come back to you. It's meant to be."

Chloe flipped her hair over her shoulder. "You're right. Something in this hallway smells, anyway. Must be the trash."

I swallowed against the burning in my throat, trying my best to ignore her words. It took me two tries to input my locker code, but I finally

succeeded. Yanking it open, I grabbed the books I'd need for homework, which was all of them.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway, but I didn't look up. It didn't take long before Colt's familiar scent of sandalwood and something earthy filled my nose.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his voice gruff.

I shut my locker with a snick. "Nothing. Just a long day."

Colt didn't need my burdens on top of all he was doing for me.

He stared down at me unconvinced.

As I looked up at his gorgeous face, the truth swirled around. Chloe was right. I'd never fit in here. Never fit in with *them*. And that broke something inside me.

I MANAGED to escape the guys once I made it home, saying I needed a nap. After a little cuddle time with Briar, who had decided she loved her new palace, I gathered up my bio book and *Crime and Punishment* and tiptoed down the stairs.

Pausing on the landing, I listened. The faint noises of what sounded like video games came from the opposite end of the house, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

I headed in the direction of the back door, thankfully avoiding meeting another person. As I stepped outside, the sea air wrapped around me in a comforting hug. I breathed deeper, letting go of some of the stress of the day.

Grabbing one of the pool towels set out in an artful display, I moved across the backyard until I knew I'd be out of the line of sight from most of the windows. I set down my books and spread out the towel.

There was a bit of a bite to the fall air, being this close to the water, and I was thankful for the sweatsuit Carly had included in my clothing haul. Just the thought of all those clothes in my closet had a riot of emotions swirling inside me. Guilt at the amount of money spent was one of the loudest, but more than that, sadness.

Because it didn't matter how many new clothes Colt bought me. I still wouldn't fit in here. And I wasn't sure I wanted to.

"Hey."

I jolted at the sound of Dash's voice.

He gave me a sheepish smile. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I just saw you walking out this way and wanted to make sure you were all right."

Sweet, kindhearted Dash. I leaned back on my hands and tipped my face up to the sun. "I'm better now."

He sat down next to me on the towel. "But not before."

"Today was a lot." I didn't look at Dash. It was easier to be honest if I kept my eyes closed and talked to the sky.

"Prep is kind of a world unto itself."

"Understatement of the century," I said, borrowing Sam's phrase.

Dash's hands closed around my crossed ankles. The innocent touch had a zing of awareness coursing through me, and my eyes flew open to meet deep blue ones.

"It'll get better. I promise," he said.

I sighed. "I don't fit here."

A furrow appeared between Dash's brows. "And you think I do?"

"Of course, you do. You're one of the Lost Boys."

He snorted. "Who told you that one?"

"Sam."

Dash nodded. "It's a dumb name. And just because I'm lumped in with them doesn't mean I fit. I'd rather spend time in my greenhouse or go to the gym than end up at some party. The people at school call me the boring one."

I scowled at that. "You're not boring." Dash was endlessly fascinating and never what you expected.

He shrugged. "My point is that none of us *really* fit. Not the way people think we should. But those same people don't really know us."

I guessed he had a point there.

Dash's blue eyes bored into me. "Do you think Chloe knows you?"

He said her name as if it tasted bad, and I couldn't help but smile. But his words had me thinking harder. Chloe might've been able to get some basic facts about my life, but the truth was what she knew could fill a thimble. That knowledge had annoyance flickering to life somewhere deep.

Dash's thumb swept back and forth across the bare skin at my ankle. "What is it?"

"I'm annoyed at myself for letting Chloe get to me."

He grinned. "That's a hell of a lot better than the pity party that was going on earlier."

I shoved at his shoulder. "Shut up."

Dash's grin only widened.

I plucked up a blade of grass, wrapping it around my finger. “I think it’s hard because I’ve wanted to belong somewhere for so long. When my dad was alive, that never mattered because I always had him. Colt and his dad, too. But after he died, and Colt and his dad vanished from my life, I was alone.”

Dash might’ve been the only person in the world I’d admit that to. Maybe because he’d laid out his own insecurities so honestly, or maybe because there was a tenderness in him that made me feel safe.

His hands tightened on my ankles. “I know that feeling. I hate that you were living in it for so long. But you’re not alone anymore. You have us.”

“It’s not that simple. Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful that Colt gave me a place to stay. But most people don’t want me here. And they’re entitled to those feelings.” Pressure built behind my eyes, and I struggled to keep my tears at bay. If I lost it now, I knew I’d end up in a massive crying jag. “For once, I want to feel wanted.”

The deep blue in Dash’s eyes flashed lighter, almost an electric blue. He leaned forward, his hand sliding along my jaw to the back of my neck. “You’re wanted, Leighton. *I* want you here. And nothing will ever change that.”

My breath hitched as some invisible force pulled me closer to Dash, to this thing brewing between us.

A low growl sounded, and then there was a flash of movement.

I jerked back as a massive dog jumped between us.

“Holy crap!” I shouted.

The husky-looking dog glared at Dash, baring his teeth.

This was so bad.

“OH, SHIT,” Dash muttered.

I crouched low, holding out my hand. “It’s okay, puppy.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Dash said, moving closer to me.

The second he did, the dog snarled again, and Dash froze.

“Hell,” he mumbled, pulling out his phone and shooting off a text.

“Don’t make any sudden movements,” I said.

The dog was beautiful. He was the largest husky I’d ever seen, with bewitching hazel eyes and a shiny coat that was a mix of colors. “It’s okay. You’re safe.”

Footsteps thundered across the lawn, and I caught sight of Ronan and Trace running toward us. I held up a hand, motioning for them to slow. “Don’t. He’s scared. You’ll spook him.”

They skidded to a stop about ten feet away.

Concern creased both their features. Ronan took one step forward. “Leighton, back up slowly and head to the house.”

I shook my head and stretched my hand out a little further. “Come here, boy. I won’t hurt you.”

The dog took a couple steps forward as he eyed the rest of the guys warily. Then a few more. I smiled as he licked my hand.

“Oh, fuck,” Trace muttered.

I scratched under the dog’s chin, ignoring Trace’s comment. “That’s it.”

The dog sat, then rolled on its side. I laughed as I scratched his belly. “You just wanted a little love, didn’t you?”

“What a cock block,” Dash muttered.

I looked up at Ronan and Trace. “Do you know if he belongs to someone around here? He’s not wearing any tags.”

Trace started laughing, and Ronan jabbed him hard in the gut with his elbow, then cleared his throat. “I’ve seen him around before, but I’m not sure where he lives.”

The dog gave a light nip to my hand as if he were annoyed I was paying attention to anyone but him.

“Hey,” I admonished. “None of that.”

The dog licked my hand instead, and I kept rubbing his belly. “That’s better.”

I glanced at Dash. “Will you take his picture with your phone?”

“Why?” he asked, suspicion lacing his tone.

“Because I want to make up some found dog posters. We need to find his owners. He’s obviously well-fed and cared for. They’re probably going out of their minds with worry.”

Trace snorted. “Or they’re relieved to have a few minutes of peace.”

I scowled at him. “Some people actually have a heart.”

Something passed over Trace’s face so quickly, I didn’t have a chance to identify it. Then the cocky expression was back. “Having a heart just makes you weak.”

“Whatever,” I muttered.

Ronan lifted his phone. “Here. I’ll do it, and then I can help you with the flyers. We’ll have security deliver them around the neighborhood.”

I beamed at him. “Thank you.”

The shutter sounded, and Ronan shoved his phone back in his pocket. “Come on. Let’s get these posters made.”

I gave the dog one last rub. “I’ll be right back. Be good.”

The dog let out a low, plaintive whine.

“That’s just pathetic,” Trace mumbled.

I glared at him as I got to my feet. The more glimpses of Trace I got, the more I realized he saw every emotion as a weakness. But the truth was, letting yourself care deeply meant you were stronger than those who didn’t because you fully experienced pain of every kind. But that also meant you fully experienced every kind of joy, too.

The dog sent a mournful look in my direction, and my heart clenched. “I won’t be long. You just wait here.”

Trace snickered, but I ignored him, following Ronan into the house.

He led me up the stairs and a couple of doors down from my room. “We can use my laptop.”

I was suddenly nervous at the idea of entering Ronan’s space. My fingers laced together in a series of intricate knots. “Thanks.”

“Of course.” He pressed his thumb to some sort of lock on his door and pulled it open.

My brows rose at the high-tech device.

He shrugged. “I’ve got a thing for security.”

A heaviness settled over me at that because this property was the most secure place I’d ever entered. The fact that Ronan still felt like he needed added protection told me he’d been through something that had marked him.

We moved into his room. It was similar to mine in size and had a sitting area that held bean bags and a couch. His bed was massive with a gray comforter and industrial frame. But it was the photography on the walls that stole my breath.

Massive black and white works of art. Dark, storming waves that crashed against the beach. The close-up of a face as a tear slid down a woman’s cheek. A broken bicycle that had been discarded along a road. Every single one evoked emotion in me that pulled and twisted.

“These are amazing,” I whispered. “Who’s the photographer?”

It wasn’t like I’d be able to afford a piece, but maybe one day.

Ronan didn’t answer, and I finally tore myself away from the art and turned to face him. He studied me intently.

“You don’t want to tell me?” Maybe he wanted to be the only one who had the powerful works on his walls.

Ronan shifted his weight and squeezed the back of his neck. “I took them.”

My jaw went slack. “Are you for real?”

He shrugged. “I was just messing around.”

“That’s bull,” I snapped, anger heating my blood. “You’re beyond talented, and downplaying that is just ridiculous. You should be selling these in galleries.”

The corner of Ronan’s mouth kicked up. “You know, you can be a firecracker when you’re heated. Didn’t expect that.”

I huffed out a breath. “I don’t like seeing talent wasted or downplayed.”

Tenderness filled Ronan's expression. "Fair enough. Come on, let's make this flyer."

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and sent the photo to his computer. Only the picture wasn't just of the dog. I was in the frame, too. My red hair fell in loose waves across my face as I smiled down at the canine.

"You can cut me out of it," I murmured.

"That's a waste, but okay."

Within a matter of minutes, he'd put together a flyer to help us find the dog's owners. "I'll send it to security, and they can get it printed and distributed."

I looked up at Ronan. "Thanks for helping me."

Those amber eyes sparked with gold flecks. "Pretty sure I'd do anything for you."

My stomach dipped and rolled. Something was wrong with me. I'd had maybe one or two crushes in my entire life, and now, all of a sudden, I was feeling pulled toward a different guy every moment.

I forced my gaze to my feet. "Thanks."

Ronan chuckled. "You're cute when you blush, Firecracker."

Before I could respond, he took my hand and led me out of his room. He didn't let go on the stairs or as we wove our way through the house. Not even when we stepped outside.

My gaze scanned the backyard. Trace and Dash stood in a heated discussion, but the dog was nowhere to be found.

I tugged my hand out of Ronan's and started running. "Where is he?"

Trace's and Dash's heads snapped up.

Dash winced. "He, uh, kinda took off."

"What? He could be hurt out here by himself."

"He'd deserve it," Trace said under his breath.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I snapped.

"Hey, guys," Colt called, jogging up.

I whirled around. "Did you see a dog? A massive husky?"

"Yeah, *Colt*," Trace ground out. "See any *dogs* while you were on your run? Leighton, here, is worried this one is lost."

Colt coughed, trying to clear his throat, and it was then I noticed he was only wearing running shorts and sneakers. I gulped as I took in the tanned skin pulled taut over defined muscles.

“Yeah, I saw him. His owner from across the street called him home.”
I breathed a sigh of relief.

Ronan came up behind me and squeezed my shoulder. “See, Firecracker? Nothing to worry about.” He paused, pinning Colt with his stare. “Some dog owners just need to be a hell of a lot more responsible.”

“THIS LOOKS AMAZING,” I told Baldwin as I took in the spread on the table.

He beamed at me. “You said Italian was your favorite. You deserve a celebration after your first day at a new school.”

I fought the wince that wanted to surface. I wasn’t sure there was much about my first day that deserved to be celebrated. But this meal might make it all worth it.

There was more food than would be possible for the five of us to eat. Fresh heirloom tomatoes and burrata. An arugula salad. Flatbread pizza. Gorgonzola gnocchi. Pasta with Bolognese. Garlic bread.

My stomach rumbled, and Dash sent me a grin. “I think that means she likes it,” he said to Baldwin.

Baldwin clapped his hands together. “Then my work here is done. Enjoy your meal, and just press the bell if you need anything.”

“The bell?” I asked, looking at Colt.

He gave me a sheepish smile. “It’s been here forever, but it does come in handy.” He pointed beneath the table.

I bent over, ducking my head to see. There was a button the person at the head of the table could push with their foot. Sitting up, I shook my head. “You guys are spoiled.”

Ronan snorted. “Maybe, but spoiled has its perks.”

I couldn’t argue with him there.

Dash grinned at me. “What can I put on your plate?”

I practically drooled. “Everything?”

He laughed and started loading me up.

When I took the first bite of gorgonzola gnocchi, I nearly died. Closing my eyes, I let the pasta melt on my tongue and moaned.

The conversation around me died, and my eyes popped open. All four guys were staring intently at my mouth. I instantly grabbed my napkin and wiped at my face. “Did I drool?”

Colt chuckled. “No drool, LeeLee.”

“But those sounds you’re making could kill a man,” Ronan said, voice a little gruffer than normal.

My cheeks flamed. *Oops*. “Sorry.”

Ronan grinned. “Definitely don’t have to apologize. It’d be a good way to go.”

But Trace looked as if he were about to murder someone.

I turned my focus back to my plate, careful to rein in my reactions. Each dish I tried was better than the last. And by the time I was finished, I had a stomachache.

I glanced at Colt. “Do you think I could bring leftovers for lunch tomorrow?”

He frowned. “Why? The food in the dining hall is good.”

I wrapped my napkin around my finger. “I think I’d like to stay clear of those shark-infested waters if I can. Library lunches are more my speed.”

“But we barely get to see you at school,” Dash complained.

He was right about that. I only had a couple classes with the guys and none with Dash because he was in such advanced ones.

I sent him a hopeful smile. “You could eat in the library with me.”

“No,” Trace said. The single word was growled low.

I raised my brow in question.

“You go running and it’ll only show weakness.”

I shrugged. “I don’t really care if someone thinks I’m weak. I just don’t want to deal with their BS.”

Trace’s violet eyes sparked and swirled. “You have no idea what you’re dealing with—”

His words were cut off as the door from the kitchen swung open and Baldwin stepped in, unease filling his expression. “Colton, Darius is here. He’d like to see you.”

Colt’s jaw tightened, a muscle in his cheek popping. “Of course. We’re done with dinner, anyway.”

Ronan sent Colt a sidelong look. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“It had to happen sometime. I’m surprised he waited this long.”

“Who’s Darius?” I asked. The energy wafting off the guys wasn’t exactly warm and fuzzy.

Colt didn’t answer right away, as if searching for the right words. “He’s a family friend, and he’s been running my dad’s company until I’m ready to take over after I graduate.”

“Oh. But you don’t like him?”

Ronan chuckled. “Firecracker is too astute for her own good.”

“Stop calling her that,” Trace snapped.

Dash squeezed my hand. “Darius is just a little too up in our business. He likes to meddle.”

That made sense. These guys were basically on their own. A parental figure was bound to want to know what was going on.

Baldwin appeared a few moments later, leading in a hulking man with brown hair and a thick beard. He dipped his head in Colt’s direction, but his eyes were on me. “Colt.”

“Good to see you, Darius. Please, join us. Baldwin can get us coffee and tea.”

“Thank you.” He strolled around to the opposite foot of the table so he was facing Colt. Then he turned the full force of his attention on me. He didn’t say a word, simply stared as if he were measuring every single thing about me.

“Darius…” Colt growled in warning.

The man’s jaw tightened. “Leighton, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Thank you?” The words came out as more of a question than a statement.

“What can we help you with tonight?” Colt asked. “Usually, you call before stopping by.”

There was a chastisement in Colt’s words that only had Darius’s jaw clenching further. “I was in the area and wanted to see how Leighton was settling in. It was her first day at Prep, correct?”

Trace leaned back in his chair, taking Darius in. “I see your spies are reporting right on time.”

Darius sighed. “I don’t have spies.”

“Suuuure,” Trace crooned. There was a hypnotic quality to his voice that had me wanting to lean closer.

“You can’t blame The Assembly for being concerned. There are a lot of factors in play.”

“This isn’t the place or the time,” Colt warned.

Darius held up his hand in a placating gesture. “I just need to be able to reassure them that you aren’t planning on doing something stupid.”

“What we do is our business alone,” Ronan gritted out.

Darius’s eyes flashed. “Not when we’re counting on you to lead. And if people think you’re falling down on your responsibilities, there’s no telling what they might do.”

I GLANCED AROUND THE SUV, surveying all the guys. Each one was stonily silent. They'd been that way since Darius had showed up the night before with his vague threats that made no sense. Colt had all but thrown him out after that.

But when I'd asked for clarity, I'd gotten almost nothing. The only little piece of information I received had come when I'd asked what The Assembly was. Colt had given some answer about it overseeing his father's company, but I wasn't sure he'd given me the entire truth.

A burning sensation lit behind my eyes. I was on the outside. I'd never felt more so. Not even the first night I'd shown up.

I knew trust took time, but this was more than that. This was locking me out.

The second Colt parked, and Ronan got out, I hurried to do the same. This time, I didn't wait for the guys. Not even when Dash called my name. They didn't want to let me in? Fine. But I didn't have to stand by like a doormat while they did it.

I hurried down the hall, only stopping briefly at my locker to deposit some books. When I made it to homeroom, about half the students were already there. Connor frowned at me. "Everything okay?"

I forced a smile. "Just peachy."

He let out a low whistle. "Really believable."

That got an authentic laugh out of me. "It's been a long few days."

It seemed impossible that I'd only been in Emerald Bay for that long, but it was true.

Connor sent me a sympathetic smile. “If you ever need a break, you can always come hang out with me. Less drama over here.”

Less drama sounded heavenly. “Thanks. I really appreciate that.”

“What’s that smell?” Chloe said loudly as she walked down the aisle. “Oh, it’s because they’re letting the trash in.”

There were snickers and whispers at her words.

I just rolled my eyes. “What’s the matter, Chloe? Can’t come up with any original material, so you have to keep repeating jokes that aren’t funny?”

She tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Just stating the truth.”

I leaned forward and spoke in an exaggerated whisper. “You might be smelling your own perfume. It’s kind of an assault on the senses.”

Chloe flushed as people laughed. “You don’t want to mess with me.”

“You’re the one starting shit. I’m just finishing it.”

“Ladies,” the teacher droned. “Please take your seats.”

Chloe did as he instructed, but there was murder in her eyes.

I ADJUSTED my backpack on my shoulder as I turned yet another corner. I cursed under my breath. I’d thought I knew where the library was, but maybe I was wrong. It seemed like each hallway I turned down got darker and darker. Or maybe they had the lights on a timer, and everything went off at lunchtime. Probably to discourage students like me from trying to escape.

I hadn’t dared go back to my locker when the bell rang because I knew Colt or one of the other guys would be waiting. They hadn’t said anything else about lunch, but I knew my presence was expected. I didn’t know why. I wasn’t sure we were even truly friends because friends didn’t lie and hide things from each other. Not good ones, anyway.

So, I was going to get acquainted with my favorite spot in any school. The place where nerds and wallflowers were always safe. The library.

Rounding another corner, I drew up short as a moan filled the air. *Oh, crap.*

I pushed myself against the wall as another moan sounded. “God, Trace. More.”

Everything in me stilled as my stomach roiled. My vision adjusted to the dark hallway, and I could just see a broad form standing in front of a girl. Some part of my brain recognized it was Mimi, her blonde hair cascading around her as her head tipped back and mouth opened in pleasure.

Trace's hand was under her kilt, moving as she panted.

I had the bizarre urge to rip that hand away and then claw Mimi's eyes out. It was ridiculous. I didn't even like Trace. He'd been nothing but rude to me, cruel even. The fact that he was with Mimi made complete sense.

She climaxed, bracing her hands against the wall as she cried out.

Trace pulled his hand from under her skirt and wiped his finger on the fabric. "Go," he barked.

Mimi looked up at him, blinking rapidly and then dropping her gaze to his crotch. "I want to return the favor."

Bizarrely, even in the low light, I could tell Trace wasn't hard. I didn't know any teenaged guy that didn't get a hard-on with a soft breeze, let alone if he was hooking up with someone.

His eyes narrowed on her. "What makes you think I'd want your hands anywhere near me?"

"Trace," Mimi whined. "I know you need me. Let me be there for you."

She reached out as if she were going to touch him, and he slammed her up against the wall, his forearm against her throat. "You overstep. You hound me, begging me to touch you, but when you get what you want, you just demand more."

"I'm sorry," she squeaked.

"This is the last time," he growled.

Mimi's eyes widened in panic. "No, Trace. Please. I swear. I won't try to touch you."

He laughed as he shoved her away, but there was cruelty in it. "Do you hear how pathetic you sound?"

Nausea rolled through me. Who talked to someone like that? Especially someone who they'd just been intimate with.

Mimi straightened, but her lower lip wobbled. "You'll be back. You *always* come back."

He scoffed. "Keep telling yourself that."

She whirled around, blonde hair flying as she stalked down the hallway.

Trace sighed. “Come on out, Little Bird. Never expected you to be such a voyeur.”

I SWALLOWED HARD, forcing myself to step out of my little hidey hole along the wall. I wouldn't let Trace make me feel embarrassed or ashamed. "More like I got assaulted with something I never needed to see."

Trace's violet eyes swirled and sparked, but there was something beneath it all. A deadness. Everything about it was wrong, and I had the sudden urge to hug him and never let go.

What the hell? I'd just seen him hooking up with one of the worst girls at school. Yet something about that wasn't exactly right. Whatever I'd just witnessed wasn't a give and take between two people. It wasn't passion. It was clinical.

My brow furrowed as I studied Trace.

He shoved off the wall. "What's the matter, Little Bird? Never seen a little hallway hookup?"

My cheeks flamed. There was nothing I could do to stop it.

Trace laughed. "God, you should see yourself. I'd almost think you were a virgin."

My expression blanked. I wanted to hide the embarrassment, but wiping every hint of emotion from my face gave me away.

Trace's jaw went slack. "You're fucking kidding me."

I lifted my chin. "What I am or am not is none of your business."

A muscle fluttered along Trace's jaw, and his nostrils flared. "Do the smart thing and keep your distance from me, Little Bird. It's what's best for both of us."

And then he was simply gone.

I blinked against the shadows in the hallway. I had the sudden, bizarre urge to cry. It wasn't even because Trace had made his dislike of me known yet again. It was more. It was a bone-deep knowledge that Trace hated himself. That understanding made me feel sick to my stomach.

Forcing my legs to move, I wandered deeper into the building. One hallway led to another and another until, finally, I found my place. The warm glow of the library lights welcomed me in.

Tiptoeing inside, I looked around. I didn't see any sign of students or even faculty. And when I caught sight of an outdoor patio, I grinned. The temperature today wasn't too cold, so I slipped outside and sat at the long table.

As I unpacked my lunch and bio book, the image of Trace's dead eyes flashed in my mind. I bit the inside of my cheek. I didn't need to feel any sort of sympathy for him. Shouldn't want to understand him more. But somehow, I did.

I dug my fork into the leftover pasta and tried to focus on the human respiratory system, but I kept having to read the same sentences two and three times.

The sound of a door opening had my head jerking up.

Declan's concerned face filled my vision. "Are you okay?"

I blinked a few times. "Sure, why?"

"You weren't at lunch, and those idiots wouldn't tell me a damn thing."

I winced at the *'idiots'* remark. "I'm not really into crowds."

Declan nodded, shuffling his feet. "Can I sit with you?"

"Sure," I mumbled, confusion washing over me. It wasn't as if Declan and I were friends. The fact that he seemed so worried about me didn't make any sense.

A smile curved his mouth, and when he sat, he inhaled deeply. A look of what I could only describe as peace filled his face. When he opened his eyes, he studied me. "Something happened."

I sighed. "Nothing really. It's just going to take some time for me to find my place here. Emerald Bay is pretty different from where I lived before."

Declan leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. "Where'd you live before?"

This was the problem with having people in your life. They wanted to know things. "A small town in Louisiana."

He nodded, frowning. “And your parents were okay with you coming to live with Colt?”

I worried the corner of my lip. “My dad passed away years ago, and my mom...she doesn’t care much what I do.” Although I was sure she was pissed about losing her housekeeper.

Pain flashed across Declan’s face. “I’m so sorry, Leighton.”

It was the first time he’d said my name. It was as if his tongue stroked each syllable, pulling me closer. I struggled to keep my breathing even. “It was a long time ago.”

“That doesn’t erase the pain. Not when you truly loved someone. That mark is with you forever.”

I stared at Declan, his white-blond hair sweeping across his forehead and his gray eyes so earnest and understanding. “Did you lose someone, too?”

“My mom. It was a long time ago, but there are still days where the pain steals my breath.”

I moved on instinct, laying my hand over his. “I’m sorry.”

His gaze locked on where our skin was joined. “Thank you.”

A faint buzz built at the contact, and I quickly pulled my hand away.

Declan cleared his throat. “Do you have plans after school?”

I inclined my head toward my textbook. “Homework. I’m pretty behind.”

He nodded. “Prep can be pretty intense.”

“I’m gathering that.”

“Maybe I could give you a ride home today?”

My stomach dipped. There was a part of me that longed to say yes. Declan didn’t make me second-guess or feel on the outside. He’d accepted me from the first moment we met. But I had a feeling Colt wouldn’t be too crazy about it. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea.”

Declan muttered something under his breath.

“Why don’t you get along with them?” I asked.

He knew exactly what I was talking about. You could’ve cut the tension at lunch yesterday with a knife. “Just family drama.”

My brows pulled together. “Family?”

Declan nodded. “Didn’t they tell you? Ronan’s my twin.”

THE ENTIRE RIDE home from school, I stole furtive glances at the guys surrounding me. Declan's revelation had felt like a massive bomb dropping. It wasn't that I thought Colt, Ronan, Dash, and Trace owed me every piece of information about their lives. But the fact that it had never once been mentioned that Ronan had a twin brother? It made me realize they were drowning in secrets.

It also made me feel dumb. Because as much as Colt had been my lifeline when we were young, I hadn't seen him in years and had no idea who he really was now. And yet, I'd just jumped when he'd offered me a place to stay. It was almost as bad as the girls in slasher movies investigating the sound in the dark, creepy basement.

I had no idea why Colt had really invited me here—what other secrets he and the rest of the guys were keeping. But I just had to make it through this year. The moment I hit graduation, I'd be out of here, and they could have their secrets and lies.

Dash bumped his shoulder with mine. "You okay?"

I looked back at the warmest of the four. The deception hurt the most from him because I'd thought he was so sincere. "Fine."

Dash's brow furrowed behind his black-framed glasses. "You sure?"

I nodded and turned my focus back to the road. If they didn't give me their answers, they sure as hell didn't deserve mine.

The moment Colt parked, and Dash got out, I hurried to follow and made a beeline for the house. No one bothered calling my name. I took the stairs two at a time and got to my room in record time.

Briar let out a loud meow. Crossing to her cat tree, I gave her a good scratch and then pressed my forehead to hers. “At least I’ve always got you.”

I ditched my backpack and changed into sweats and one of the artfully slouchy tees Carly had sent. I knew I should jump right into homework, but I was too twitchy. Going downstairs would be a risk, but the house was huge. Hopefully the guys had already disappeared into their respective corners.

Slipping out of my bedroom, I paused to listen. I didn’t hear a thing, so I tiptoed downstairs and wound my way toward the kitchen.

Baldwin rounded a corner, a bright smile on his face. “Leighton. Are you hungry? Can I make you a snack?”

I bit my lip. “Hi. I was actually wondering if I could use your kitchen?”

His brows lifted. “I can make you anything you’d like.”

“I like cooking.” It used to calm the chaos in my mind like nothing else. Until I’d gotten too scared to brave the kitchen in my mom’s house. “It’s been a while since I’ve had a nice space to do it in.”

My dad and I used to make pancakes every Saturday and cupcakes on special occasions. And he taught me all about marinades that he would make from scratch. Cooking was the best way to feel close to him when I missed him. And right now, I missed him like crazy.

Baldwin’s expression gentled. “Of course. You’re welcome to the kitchen anytime. Do you want me to give you a tour?”

I shook my head. “I’ll figure it out. Thank you.”

He nodded. “Just holler if you need anything.”

Baldwin disappeared just as quickly as he’d appeared, seeming to understand that I needed a little alone time.

I took a deep breath as I looked around the space. It was the kind of kitchen you saw in magazines—or maybe some reality show about rich people. There were three different ovens, a massive cooktop, two refrigerators, and more appliances than I could count. But it was the pantry that had me gaping.

The storage space was practically the size of a garage. My gaze swept over every nook and cranny. It was expertly organized with tags scrawled in perfect calligraphy. There were enough snacks and dry ingredients to take us through an apocalypse.

As I took in all the options, I knew instantly what I wanted to make. I got to work gathering flour, sugar, cocoa powder, potato chips, and a few other things. Then I pulled eggs and milk from one of the fridges. Before long, I had all the dry ingredients mixed, and I was feeling a little more in control of things.

That was what making something with your own two hands did. Gave you back a little of that feeling that you could master your own universe.

“Should I be worried you’re going to burn down the house?”

I whirled at the sound of Ronan’s deep voice.

He chuckled. “You were really in the zone there.”

I scowled at him. “Well, maybe you shouldn’t sneak up on people.”

A flicker of surprise lit in Ronan’s eyes. “What’s going on, Firecracker?”

I turned back to the bowl of dry ingredients, making doubly sure that they were mixed as well as they should be. “Nothing. I just wanted some time to myself.”

I thought for sure he’d take the hint but, of course, Ronan didn’t. He moved in closer so that I could feel the heat coming off him in waves. “Brownies and...potato chips?”

I scooted away from him and went in search of a mixer.

Ronan caught my elbow, halting my progress. “Talk to me. Something’s obviously bothering you.”

My back teeth gnashed together, and I fought the urge to scream. “What could possibly be bothering me? It’s not like random people show up at the house and give cryptic warnings, but then you guys refuse to tell me what’s going on. Or that I don’t even know why all of you live here. Or that I walked up on Trace hooking up with the worst girl ever. Or that I found out you have a twin brother that you never once mentioned, but it seems like you hate each other.”

I sucked in air, trying to catch my breath after my tirade.

Ronan winced, dropping his hold on my elbow. “Well, when you put it like that...”

I slumped against the counter. “You’re all just incredibly confusing. One minute, I think you want to be friends, and the next, it’s like you don’t want me anywhere near you or your business.”

Pain flashed across Ronan’s face. “It’s not that we don’t want you with us. We do. More than we probably should. But being near us isn’t always

safe.”

“*That*,” I growled. “It’s cryptic crap like what you just said that is driving me batty. Either tell me what’s going on or just leave me alone. I can stay out of your hair until I graduate. Declan said he could give me a ride to and from school.”

“*Declan* isn’t giving you a ride anywhere,” Ronan snarled.

My eyes widened at the ferocity in his tone. “What happened with you two?”

Ronan opened his mouth, and I knew it was going to be another of those nonanswers.

I held up a hand. “If you go all cryptic on me again, I’m going to smash this egg on your head.”

A laugh burst out of him, which was the last reaction I was expecting. He shook his head, grinning. “You really are a firecracker.”

I just arched a brow.

Ronan sighed. “He’s not anything to me but blood. I honestly don’t think of him as a brother. Colt, Trace, and Dash are way more my brothers than he is.”

My stomach cramped at the hurt that lived below those words. “Why?”

Ronan’s gaze locked with mine. “Because he betrayed me when I needed him most.”

I could’ve given him hell for going cryptic on me again. But I could tell it wasn’t because he was trying to hide things from me. It was because it was too painful to talk about. I had things like that.

I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around his waist, squeezing hard. “I’m sorry.”

Ronan didn’t move for a beat. I was about to let go when his arms came around me in answer. The move was robotic, as if he hadn’t hugged someone in years.

Ronan rested his chin on the top of my head and breathed deeply. “Thanks, Firecracker.”

We stood there for several minutes, and I let myself revel in the warmth of Ronan, as if he were my own personal heater. Finally, he released me and stepped back, a small smile on his lips. “Can I help you make whatever weird thing this is that involves both brownie batter and potato chips?”

I huffed out a breath. “You’re going to be eating those words when you taste my potato chip brownies.”

Ronan scrunched up his nose. “Potato chip brownies?”

“Don’t knock them,” I warned. “It’s the salty and sweet. They’re delicious.”

“They sound disgusting.”

“You know, you don’t have to help.”

He held up both hands. “Just tell me what to do.”

“Grab me a mixer.” I bent, my slouchy tee sliding off one shoulder as I turned on the oven to three hundred and fifty degrees.

Footsteps sounded behind me, then stopped, and Ronan sucked in a breath.

“What. The. Hell. Happened. To. You?”

I FROZE, ice sliding through my veins. How could I have been so stupid? I hadn't been thinking when I'd grabbed this shirt. The cotton had just been so comfortable that I hadn't seen past that. Hadn't thought that the neck of the tee would be wide enough to expose my scars. *Dumb, dumb, dumb.*

Quickly straightening, I hurried to right my T-shirt. "Nothing. Will you hand me the mixer?"

I couldn't force myself to meet Ronan's eyes. Wouldn't be able to handle the disgust there. But his ragged breathing was all I could hear.

"Turn. Around," he growled.

My hands gripped the counter, the edge of the marble digging into them.

"Now!"

The fury in his tone had me jerking and whirling. My breaths came faster and faster.

"Did someone do this to you?" His fingers locked in the cotton of my T-shirt, pulling it down and exposing a section of gnarled skin on my shoulder.

I hated the idea of anyone seeing it, especially him. When you didn't get proper medical attention quickly after receiving third-degree burns, there was only so much they could do.

I would always carry the mark of my mother's torture. Every time my fingers skated over the mangled skin in the shower, memories would assault me, one after the other, each one worse than the previous. So, even now, more than one thousand miles from her, I wasn't truly free.

The fury on her face flashed in my mind. "*You're of the Devil! I'll burn it out of you!*"

My ribs constricted, making it harder to breathe.

Burn it out of me. Whatever invisible thing she'd seen, she had done just that. The memory of the pain sliced through me.

"Who?" Ronan demanded, his voice echoing off the walls. "Tell me who, and I'll fucking end them."

Tears leaked out of my eyes, streaking down my face. I couldn't speak. Couldn't move. My entire body trembled.

Footsteps echoed on the floor, but I couldn't make myself look, couldn't see anything but that horrific morning.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Dash yelled at Ronan. "Can't you tell she's fucking terrified?"

The shaking only intensified.

"Someone burned her," Ronan gritted out.

Gentle arms came around me. "It's okay, Leighton. You're safe."

I thrashed in Dash's hold, striking out as if even though my brain knew it was him, my body saw everything as an attack. He cursed but held on.

"It's me, Leighton. I'm not going to hurt you. You're safe."

Dash said the words over and over as he held me. "Get Colt," he barked.

A few moments later, footsteps thundered against the floor. "Jesus! What did you do?"

"She has burns on her back," Ronan said, pure pain in his voice. "Someone did it to her. I just wanted to know who..."

Colt cursed, and then cool hands were pressed to my face. "Breathe, LeeLee. You have to breathe, or you're going to pass out."

My muscles just shook worse, and my legs started to give out.

Colt scooped me up in his arms, and then we were moving. But my breaths wouldn't slow. I was too far gone.

"Maybe we should call Doc," Dash muttered.

"Give me a minute," Colt snapped.

A second later, he was lowering us to a couch, but he didn't let go of me. He rocked me back and forth, whispering over and over again to breathe, telling me I was safe, that no one would hurt me here.

I wanted so badly to believe him.

"Someone burned her?" Trace's cool, gritty tone just barely pierced my haze.

"There's a damned perfect circle branded on her back," Ronan snapped.

The pot. The boiling water had done its own damage, but the pot had been the worst.

My tears came faster, harder. Why did she hate me so much? Her own daughter? How could anyone be that cruel? What was it about me that was so unlovable?

“Who?” Trace demanded, such fury in his tone.

“That’s what I was trying to figure out,” Ronan barked.

“But you sent Leighton into a panic attack with all your questions,” Dash accused.

“We need to know who this was,” Ronan defended. “So we can protect her.”

“Not like this. Not when it terrifies her.”

Colt curled himself around me more, pressing his lips to my temple. “You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

Ronan and Dash kept fighting. I couldn’t stand them being at odds. All because I was weak, falling apart at the drop of a hat.

I struggled to get words out. To give voice to what I needed to.

“Shut up,” Colt yelled in the guys’ direction. Then he was back to nuzzling my neck. “Try again, LeeLee.”

“It was my mom,” I croaked.

And then everyone exploded.

EACH PERSON TALKED over the other. There were threats of bodily harm, murder, and who knew what else. But I couldn't stop shaking.

"Enough!" Colt barked. The room went silent. "This isn't helping."

Three other sets of eyes zeroed in on me. Each held an array of emotions. Dash's were full of sympathy and pain. Ronan's held agony and rage. But Trace, his were full-on murderous.

I tried in vain to get my body under control. My tears had slowed, but I couldn't stop the tremors still wracking through me. Yet I was exhausted. As if the heaviest weights had settled over every part of me.

Colt stood, cradling me in his arms. "It's okay, LeeLee."

My head slumped against his chest as he carried me as if I weighed nothing. He quickly climbed the stairs, and Dash hurried ahead to open my bedroom door. I heard the telltale hiss from Briar as the guys entered my room, but I couldn't find it in me to tell her to stop. I was already fading.

Colt laid me on my bed, but when he went to release me, my eyes flew open, and I clutched his T-shirt, my fingers fisting in the worn fabric. "Don't leave, please."

Pain streaked across his beautiful face. "I'm not going anywhere, LeeLee."

Colt kicked off his shoes as someone else pulled mine off. He climbed into bed behind me, pulling me against him. I went easily.

The bed dipped, and Dash's scent of pine and cedar filled my nose as his hand stroked up and down my back.

Colt's lips ghosted across my hair. "I should've been there. You'll never know how sorry I am."

And then darkness took me under.

HEAT SWIRLED around me like a cocoon of bright sunlight. Everything about it was comfort and safety. Yet something was pulling at me, back into the realm of consciousness.

Awareness came in waves. A hand linked with mine, fingers interwoven. My cheek pressed against a muscled chest. Another hand holding tight to my ankle.

I blinked, faint sunlight filling my gaze. Sunlight and my human pillow...Colt.

“How do you feel?”

His voice was a husky whisper, and suddenly, Dash was shifting behind me, sitting up so that he could see my face. Ronan pushed up from his spot across the foot of my bed, letting go of my ankle. But it was Trace that had my jaw dropping. He sat propped in a chair near my bed, Briar curled in his lap...purring.

“LeeLee?” Colt pressed.

I shook my head, pushing myself up against the pillows. “I’m okay.” The words came out more like a croak, giving away the rollercoaster I’d been on yesterday.

The memories catapulting through my mind made me wince. “I’m sorry about the meltdown.”

Pain carved itself into Ronan’s face. “I’m the one who’s sorry. I never should’ve pushed.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m just not used to covering the scars at home because there’s never been anyone to see them.”

A muscle along Colt’s jaw ticked. “You don’t have to hide them around us.”

Dash linked his fingers with mine again. “He’s right. *You* have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Unlike your mother,” Trace growled low. “She deserves to have her skin peeled from her body, nice and slow.”

The image of him stroking Briar as he spoke such violent threats short-circuited my brain. And why did Trace even care? He hated me.

Colt brushed the hair from my face. “Why didn’t you tell anyone what happened?”

I worried the corner of my lip. This wasn’t an easy one to answer. “Sometimes, the unknown is far scarier than anything else. For a while afterward, she was better. She took me to a doctor after a couple of days, but I knew if I told them what had really happened, I’d end up in Child Protective Services.”

Trace’s eyes narrowed. “And I’m sure she told you just how horrible that would be so you wouldn’t speak up.”

My lips pressed together in a firm line because Trace was right. My mom had let me know just what horrible things could happen to you in foster care.

Trace’s expression gentled. “She was manipulating you. Because she knew that if she was found out, her ass would end up in jail.”

My stomach twisted as pressure built behind my eyes. “She hates me so much, and I could never figure out why.”

He sat up, shifting Briar with him. “She hates you because you’re everything she’ll never be. Special. Smart. Kind.”

I stared at Trace, blinking as if trying to clear the mirage that was him being kind to me. “You don’t know that. You don’t know me.”

“I do. I know that you got straight A’s at your last school, even though you worked practically a full-time job on the side. I know that you took in a stray cat that was injured.” His finger flicked over Briar’s ear that was missing its tip. “And I know that you were the best friend Colt’s ever had because he never shut up about you. So, I know enough.”

I swallowed hard.

Trace’s eyes glowed, the violet in his irises sparking. “Your mom was jealous and bitter and fucked in the head. And if you believe any of the lies she told you, then you’re an idiot.”

He stood, depositing Briar on the floor, and stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

I stared at the place Trace had disappeared through. “What was that?” I whispered.

Dash chuckled. “Trace’s love language. Only he can call you an idiot and make it seem like the nicest thing you’ve ever heard.”

Ronan squeezed my ankle. “He cares. It’s just hard for him.”

“Why?” I asked.

Shadows swept over Ronan's eyes. "I'm not trying to keep things from you, but it's also not my place to tell."

I nodded. "I get it." I'd be pissed as hell if someone spilled my secrets without my permission.

Colt kneaded the muscles along my shoulder. "Why don't we call off school today? We can do a movie marathon in the theater, and Baldwin can make us snacks."

I shook my head. "I can't afford to miss classes. I'm already behind." And if I laid around all day, I'd just think about the past. Being distracted is what would help most.

Dash frowned. "Are you sure? Yesterday was a lot..."

I didn't want to tell them that I dealt with nightmares and flashbacks on the regular. That would just upset them.

I curved my mouth into a smile the best I could. "I'm sure. School is just what I need right now."

And the truth was I'd never felt safer than sleeping surrounded by those four guys last night. I just wasn't sure what that meant...

I SKIMMED my hands over my kilt, smoothing out invisible wrinkles. Briar let out a meow as if to say, “*You’re stalling.*”

“Yeah, yeah,” I mumbled. But I still didn’t open the door.

Something had shifted yesterday. Walls had crumbled, and the guys now saw me a little more clearly. And I was getting a more accurate picture of them, too. It was like excavating some ancient archeological dig. Each stroke of my brush revealed a little bit more.

Letting out a long breath, I opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. I started toward the stairs but came up short at the sound of voices.

“I never should’ve let her out of my sight. It’s my fault those fucking scars are all over her back,” Colt growled.

“You thought you were protecting her. You had no idea what she was dealing with at home,” Ronan argued.

Protecting me? From what?

A whistle sounded, and Trace inclined his head toward the stairs. “Nosy company.”

I scowled at him. “I’m walking down the stairs. You’re the ones whispering behind my back.”

The corner of Trace’s mouth kicked up. “You were eavesdropping, otherwise, you would’ve been walking not waiting.”

“Whatever,” I grumbled.

Colt’s gaze swept over me. “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

I nodded. “I’m fine, really.”

The truth was that I was still a little shaky, an emotional hangover. But we’d had a massive breakfast earlier, and I’d be fine once the routine of

school kicked in.

Dash didn't look convinced. "Just text one of us if you decide classes are too much, and we can take you home."

I gave him an authentic smile. He was always looking out for me. "Thank you."

Colt swung his keys around his finger and headed for the front door. We all followed behind him, taking our usual seats in the Range Rover.

I wondered what ordained those seats. Colt was always the driver, and Trace always took shotgun. I hadn't had friends in Louisiana, but in the books, I read guys were always fighting over who sat in the front or who drove. These four never did.

Ronan reached over and massaged the spot between my brows with his thumb. "You look like you're trying to work out one of Dash's ridiculous calculus problems."

The casual touch sent a wave of heat dancing across my skin. I swallowed hard, trying to find the words I needed when my body was going haywire. "I was just wondering why you guys never fight about who sits in the front or who drives."

Trace's gaze flashed to me in the rearview mirror, but he didn't say anything.

"I think we've just got bigger things to worry about," Dash explained.

I knew that was true. I didn't know Trace's story, but I knew that Colt and Dash had both lost the people closest to them, and Ronan didn't have a relationship with his family for some reason. It dawned on me then that he'd lost his mother, too. When Declan had shared that with me yesterday, I hadn't known that he and Ronan were brothers. My heart ached for them both.

"We're just mature for our age," Colt said with a grin.

Ronan snorted. "Your breakfast of choice is Fruity Pebbles or Count Chocula. Pretty sure that knocks you out of the running for mature."

Colt flipped him off. "Like you're one to talk, with your action figure collection."

Ronan flushed. "They're collectibles."

Trace barked out a laugh. "You'd probably still sleep in superhero sheets if Baldwin hadn't redecorated your room."

"You're all a bunch of assholes," he muttered.

Something about the exchange made me smile. As if I were finally getting a peek at how the guys were on a normal day when drama wasn't around every corner.

Ronan sent me a dirty look. "You could tone down the grin."

I only smiled wider. "I like superhero movies."

His brows rose. "Really?"

I nodded, then blushed.

His finger skimmed across my cheek. "What's this pretty pink about?"

I pressed my lips together and then realized I might as well confess. "I didn't really have the extra money for movie tickets, so I used to sneak into the local theater through the staff entrance in the back."

Trace glanced over his shoulder, brows raising. "Breaking and entering, Little Bird? I'm shocked."

I rolled my eyes. "It wasn't exactly breaking, seeing as the door was never locked."

Dash laughed. "Shows ingenuity."

"Anything for Thor. He's pretty handsome, you know."

Four growls filled the vehicle, and I couldn't help but laugh.

Colt pulled into his usual parking space, and we all piled out of the vehicle. I groaned as I saw Chloe approaching with Mimi and Grace in tow. She beamed at the guys, ignoring me altogether.

"Hey, guys. I'm really looking forward to this weekend. It's been so long since we've all been together."

I stiffened. The idea that Colt, Ronan, Dash, and Trace were getting together with Chloe made me physically ill.

"Stop acting like they made plans with you," Declan drawled as he walked up.

Chloe's gaze jerked in his direction. "I never said that, just that we'd *all* be seeing each other."

Declan rolled his eyes. "Not by choice."

Chloe's teeth ground together, and she looked about two seconds away from stomping her foot. It wasn't a good look.

"Run along, Chlo," he said without even looking at her. "None of us want to deal with you until we absolutely have to."

"One thing I actually agree with Dec on," Colt muttered.

Chloe flushed and stormed off, her friends on her heels.

Declan's brow furrowed as he approached me. He lifted a hand, ghosting a finger under my eye. "You okay?"

The faint touch sent a pleasant shiver skating over my skin. "Fine. Just didn't sleep that great."

It was a total lie. I'd slept the best I had since my dad had died. But I knew the breakdown hangover left me with dark circles and red eyes.

Declan slipped a hand under my hair and kneaded my neck. "Maybe you should go home and rest."

Heat spread through me at his touch, and before I knew it, I was practically falling into Declan, my head pressed against his chest and my eyes half-closed.

"No... I gotta go to classes," I mumbled, sounding half-drunk.

"Enough," Ronan gritted out. "Stop pawing at her."

My eyes flew open, ping-ponging between the two brothers as they glared at each other.

This was bad on so many levels. But mostly because if I were honest with myself, I felt pulled to all five of these guys. And that made me the worst kind of low...

I WAS QUIET DURING HOMEROOM. Even Connor's easy banter couldn't pull me out of my thoughts. Because I was lost in the endless cycle of trying to figure out how I'd somehow developed feelings for five different guys, one who didn't especially like me all that much. What was wrong with me?

"You sure you're okay?" Connor asked as I grabbed my backpack, shoving my copy of *Crime and Punishment* back inside.

I gave him a sheepish smile. "I didn't sleep that great last night, and when I don't get my eight hours, I'm pretty pathetic."

Guilt gnawed at me for lying, but it was safer to stick with the same story.

Connor chuckled. "You need one of those mega-sized energy drinks."

"Oh, no. I'd be jumping off the walls like you wouldn't believe, and then I'd never sleep tonight."

"Okay, no caffeine for you."

We signed the attendance sheet and headed out into the hallway. I nearly collided with Damien.

His nose wrinkled as if he smelled something bad, and his gaze zeroed in on my necklace. "Who gave you that?" he barked.

I skittered back a few steps, my fingers curling around the locket. "I don't think that's any of your business."

His friend, Caspian, tugged him back. "Not here." But he glared at me as if he'd like to eat me for lunch.

Damien practically snarled in my direction. "They won't be able to keep you safe forever."

I gripped the necklace harder as they stalked away. *Keep me safe from what? Him?* Dash's words about never taking the locket off played in my head, how it would protect me. But that wasn't possible, was it?

"Just ignore him," Connor said. "He's mostly bark." But the worried look on Connor's face told me that might not be true.

"Sure," I mumbled.

"See you at lunch," he said with a wave, and I headed toward English Lit.

As I walked, I felt eyes on me, even more than my first day. Unease slid through me as students bent their heads and whispered. As I passed Chloe, Mimi, and Grace, Chloe sent me a triumphant smile. Her voice took on an exaggeratedly sympathetic tone as she spoke to her friends. "It's really sad, you know. Imagine living in that trash heap. No wonder Colt pitied her enough to let her live with him. He's got such a good heart."

I stiffened but forced myself to keep moving. She didn't know anything about me. She was guessing.

But then I saw the flyers in people's hands. My mouth went dry, and my skin grew hot as I glimpsed at what was on the paper. *Trash comes from a junkyard.* And there was a photo of my mom's house. The overgrown grass. The discarded machinery and who knew what else in the front yard.

Embarrassment flooded me, but I refused to let Chloe win. I kept my head held high and walked on.

Colt, Ronan, and Dash hurried down the hall. Colt got to me first. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." But my voice was pitched low, barely audible.

Concern washed over his features. "I have no idea how someone got a picture of your house."

My back teeth ground together. "It was Chloe."

Colt's brows flew up. "How do you know?"

"She was just whispering about it to her two cronies," I snapped.

Colt's doubt that she would do something like this stung.

"Fucking bitch," Ronan groused.

Dash's eyes hardened in her direction. "I'm sorry, Leighton. She's always been cruel, but this is another level."

Colt squeezed my hand. "I'll figure out a way to deal with her. I promise."

I shook my head. “If you give her attention, she’ll just keep doing it. We ignore her, and eventually, she’ll stop.”

Dash looked doubtful. “I’m not sure you get how determined Chloe can be.”

A commotion down the hall had me shifting focus. Declan strode through the crowd, practically shoving people aside as he went. His eyes flashed on me but then shifted to Ronan, the color bleeding to silver, rage pulsing there.

Oh, crap.

Before any of us could move to defuse the situation, Declan had Ronan shoved up against the lockers, his arm pressed against Ronan’s throat. “How could you not tell me?”

Ronan’s hand shot out, squeezing around Declan’s neck. “You act like you’re owed anything from me.”

Dash and Colt hurried to pull them apart, but it wasn’t easy. There was a scuffle and curses as both brothers struggled to keep hold of the other.

“Do you want to get suspended?” Colt threatened low. “This isn’t the place.”

Declan shot a glare in Colt’s direction, rage and pain there. “If he wasn’t going to tell me, then you damn well should’ve. If someone was hurting her, I needed to know.”

All the blood drained from my head. *Hurting her.* Hurting me. Declan knew.

Trace hurried up to the group, his gaze jumping between Declan and his friends.

Ronan stiffened. “You told him?”

Trace gripped the back of his own neck, squeezing. “He needed to know. He’s a part of this, whether you want him to be or not.”

Ronan charged as if he were going to deck Trace, but Dash stepped in front of him and shoved him back. “Don’t. Colt’s right. Not here.”

Declan’s gaze locked on me. “Leighton.”

There was so much pain in that one word. He knew everything. The bruises Colt had seen on me. Where I’d lived. The scars on my back.

Tears pricked my eyes as my head jerked in Trace’s direction. “You had no right.”

My voice trembled with fury on every word. And then I bolted.

MY VISION BLURRED as I ran down the hallway. I didn't have the first clue where I was going. All I knew was that I had to get away.

Trace might as well have stripped me bare in front of the entire student body. Another surge of fury blasted through me. How dare he? What right did he have to tell someone else my darkest secrets?

I rounded corner after corner, ignoring the bell as it rang. The crowds of students disappeared, and my footsteps slowed until I stopped altogether. Lowering myself to the steps in a back hallway, I wrapped my arms around my legs and pressed myself against the wall.

Everything in me felt raw and exposed. The scars on my back flamed hotter as if my flesh were on fire all over again.

Footsteps sounded on the tile, but I didn't look up. Maybe if I kept my head down, whoever was coming would just pass me by.

The footsteps slowed, but I still didn't look up.

A figure crouched in front of me, but I didn't want to look. Didn't want to see whoever it was.

Declan's face filled my vision. Pure agony was etched into his features.

Icy claws dug into my chest. I didn't want him to hurt. Not for any reason but especially not because of me.

"I'm so sorry."

I swallowed against the burn in my throat as shame swamped me. I never should've let it happen. The first time my mother backhanded me, I should've gone straight to the school counselor and told her everything. Hell, I should've walked to the police station and filed a report myself. I'd

let fear keep me from doing it, and now all anyone would look at me with was pity.

“Leighton,” Declan crooned, his voice hoarse. “Please look at me.”

“I don’t want to see it,” I whispered.

“See what?”

“The pity,” I croaked. “I don’t want to know that all you’ll see me as now is this weak, broken girl.”

Large, rough hands came up to frame my face, forcing my gaze to Declan’s. “I will *never* see you as weak. Never broken. The only thing I see when I look at you is steel forged in fire. You’re stronger than most people will ever understand. And only more beautiful because of it.”

My breath hitched as Declan’s eyes went silver yet again. There was something beneath that silver, an understanding.

“Why do you care so much?” The question slipped out before I had a chance to stop it. But it was the one thing I was dying to know.

Declan stared down at me, not moving his hands from my cheeks. Instead of answering, he asked me another question. “If you knew someone was hurting me, how would you feel?”

A rage that stole my breath blasted through me. “I’d want to kill them.”

A smile stretched across his face. “Pretty much how I feel, too.”

Declan’s thumbs stroked over my cheeks in a calming rhythm, easing the worst of my anger. His smile slipped away. “I can’t stand the thought of someone hurting you.”

“It doesn’t make sense. We barely know each other.” I tried to figure out how the depth of protectiveness I felt over Declan and the guys made sense. How I could feel this pull toward all of them.

“Intense emotions aren’t always logical. Sometimes, you’re simply meant to be in certain people’s lives. It doesn’t take long to realize that.”

That might be true, but there was more here, and my brain was battling to understand it.

Declan pressed his forehead against mine. “I know it might be scary. I can give you all the time in the world. Just don’t ask me to stay away from you while you take that time.”

Everything in me revolted at the thought of Declan staying away. But that didn’t make sense either. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, trying to ease my panic. That was a mistake. The scent of fresh rain and mint filled

my nose. It wasn't a combination I ever would've considered, but I wanted to roll around in it.

"Declan..." I breathed.

His hold on me tightened. "Tell me to go."

"What if I don't want you to go?" A pull low in my belly grew stronger.

"So brave," he whispered, his thumb skating across my lower lip. "So beautiful."

It was me who closed the distance, my lips finding his in desperate need. Declan's tongue slid inside, stroking mine. It was an explosion of sensation. The bite of mint. The spark of fire. It all swirled around me as I lost myself in everything that was Declan. It didn't matter that what I felt for him wasn't logical. All that mattered was that this feeling never left.

I pressed myself into Declan, seeking more, seeking everything.

He growled low, his hands fisting in my hair.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Chloe's shrill voice cut through the air.

And just like that, a bucket of ice water might as well have been dumped over my head.

DECLAN PUSHED to his feet and whirled on Chloe. “What the hell is your problem?”

Chloe flushed, and her eyes blazed. “You *know* what my problem is. You know what our future holds. You can’t do this!”

There was no almost-foot stomp this time. She slammed her foot down like a three-year-old who hadn’t gotten the candy they wanted.

Declan glared at Chloe. “As far as I know, The Assembly still supports free will.”

What the hell was this Assembly that they all kept talking about?

“You know it’s not as simple as that.” Chloe’s voice softened, almost taking on a croon. “We need you all to lead. But you have to be anchored to do that.”

Declan cast a quick look in my direction.

Suddenly, I felt on the outside again. But that was exactly what Chloe had wanted. I stood, dodging the two of them, and headed down the hall.

Declan tried to follow, but Chloe grabbed his arm to halt him. I didn’t even want to look at them. Picking up my pace, I tried to get my bearings and at least find my way to my next class, even though I’d likely have to kiss English Lit goodbye for today.

Footsteps sounded behind me, and then Declan’s hand closed around my elbow. “Leighton.”

I turned, looking up at him. The moment Declan took in my glassy eyes, pain streaked across his face. “I’m sorry. Chloe’s a piece of work and—”

“Just stop,” I whispered. Suddenly, I was exhausted. The kind of fatigue that swept through you and settled into your bones.

“Stop what?”

“You all have an endless stream of secrets, and that’s fine, but I don’t want to be around people like Chloe, and it’s obvious you have a tie to her.”

Declan gripped my arm tighter. “It’s not like that.”

“Then explain it to me.”

He didn’t speak right away, and I tugged my arm from his grasp, shaking my head.

“It’s our families,” Declan said.

I paused, looking up at him.

“They’ve been tied together for centuries. It means we’re limited in what we can do about Chloe, no matter how much we dislike her.”

“The Assembly?” I asked.

Declan nodded. “It’s kind of like a community organization. Families that have been in leadership for a long time.”

My heart picked up speed. “And they want you to do what?”

He swallowed hard, his eyes boring into mine. “We’re all expected to lead, but they want Chloe to lead with us.”

I stared harder, trying to read deeper into Declan’s words. They felt truthful, but it was like there was something more. Something underneath those words.

Declan laced his fingers through mine. “That’s not what any of us want. But we have to tread carefully because of expectations.”

I hated that for all of them. To not be able to simply live how you wanted to or be associated with whom you wanted to. This world of the powerful elite was unlike anything I’d ever known.

I squeezed Declan’s hand. “Thank you for telling me.”

He pulled me close, kissing the top of my head. “Trust me when I say, you’re the only one that I want. Always.”

I FOLLOWED my classmates out of AP Bio and into the throng of students making their way to the dining hall. But they were all a haze. I was lost in a train of cycling thoughts. Declan’s words echoed over and over in my head. *“Trust me when I say, you’re the only one that I want. Always.”*

God, I wanted that. Wanted *him*. But he wasn't the only one I wanted, and that had guilt swamping me.

"Hey, Leighton." Connor grinned down at me as he came to a stop at my side.

"Hi," I returned, trying to cast off my existential crisis.

"There's a party at Joe's lake house tomorrow. You should come."

I blinked a few times. I hadn't once been to a party at my old school. When your entire goal was to be invisible, you didn't tend to get invited. I had no idea if I'd even like parties.

"Why does it feel like I just asked you to solve the world's most complicated equation?" Connor asked.

I looked up at him. "I've never been to a party."

He blinked a few times. "Seriously?"

I shrugged. "I didn't really have friends at my old school."

Connor's brow furrowed, and then he grinned, slinging an arm over my shoulder. "Well, you've got friends now." His eyes flared for a moment. "Damn girl, you smell—"

"Finish that sentence, and I will remove your spleen from your body," Ronan growled behind us.

"Shit!" Connor instantly dropped his arm. "Sorry, I didn't mean anything by it. I just haven't smelled anyone like—"

Ronan growled.

Connor snapped his mouth shut, his gaze ping-ponging between the two of us. "I'm gonna go. See you guys later."

I stared up at Ronan. "What the heck was that about?"

"He shouldn't be touching you," Ronan grumbled.

"Shouldn't I be the one to decide that?"

Ronan stilled. "Did you want him touching you?"

There was something akin to pain in his face as he spoke, and I took pity on him.

"Not like *that*. But he's my friend. I haven't had a lot of those in my life, and it's nice."

The tension in Ronan eased as we moved toward the dining hall. "Okay. I still don't like him touching you, though. Scenting you."

I wrinkled my nose. "What is it with the smell thing?"

Ronan's mouth curved into a grin, and the effect was devastating. "You smell amazing, Leighton."

“I’m not wearing perfume or anything.”

Ronan shrugged. “It’s just you.” His footsteps slowed as we approached our lunch table. “Are you okay?”

There were likely a million reasons why he was asking. Chloe’s stunt about where I’d come from. Trace betraying me to Declan. The fact that this whole world was still very new.

I took a deep breath. “I’ve made it through way worse than this.”

Ronan’s jaw went granite hard. *Shit*. That had been the wrong thing to say.

“No one hurts you. Not anymore. And that includes Trace,” Ronan gritted out.

I swallowed hard and nodded. Wrapping my arms around Ronan, I pressed my face to his chest. “I’m okay. Promise.”

He rested his chin on my head and breathed deep. “Good,” he grunted.

I released him, suddenly aware that every eye in the dining hall was trained on us. I sighed. “Don’t they have anything better to focus on?” I grumbled.

Ronan chuckled. “Their lives are obviously boring.”

As we approached our table, I saw that someone had grabbed food for both of us. Declan was already here, and I braced for hurt at him seeing me with his brother, but there was only curiosity in his expression.

Dash sent me a cautious smile. “Missed you this morning.”

I took the seat next to him and leaned over, pressing my shoulder against his. “Missed you, too.”

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “I need some classes with you.”

“We all do,” Colt grouched.

I sent a look in his direction. “Grumpy much?”

“When people mess with you, I get grumpy.”

The statement had my gaze shifting to Trace. For the first time since I’d met him, he seemed unsure. *Good*. He should be sweating after the shit he pulled.

I pinned him with a stare. “If you ever share my private business with *anyone* ever again, I will castrate you myself.”

Our entire table went silent.

Trace swallowed, then nodded. “Understood.”

“Good.” I grabbed a potato chip and popped it into my mouth. “Connor invited me to a party this weekend at some lake house. Can we all go?”

It took the guys a few seconds to make the transition, and then they were all talking.

“No way,” Colt snapped.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Dash mumbled.

“Over my dead body are you going to that party,” Ronan gritted out.

I slumped in my chair. So much for my first party, my first normal high school experience.

Declan reached under the table and squeezed my knee. “I’ll take you to the party.”

I instantly brightened, but that quickly died when I took in the murderous looks on the other guys’ faces.

BRIAR MEOWED from her spot atop her fancy cat tower, and I was thankful for the sound. The massive house was entirely too quiet since the guys had left for their Assembly meeting. I still hadn't learned much about it, but at least they weren't hiding its existence.

My stomach cramped at the thought of them all cozy with Chloe. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to clear away the thoughts. Instead, I focused on the good memories. The ones from today where we'd holed up in the guys' lounge and caught up on homework. There'd been snacks and jokes, and it had felt almost...normal.

But it didn't feel exactly *right*. Because one person was missing. I wondered how Ronan and the rest of the guys would react if I invited Declan to our next study session. I still wasn't sure what exactly had gone down with him and Ronan, but I so badly wanted to heal that rift.

Maybe tonight could be the start of that.

I opened the door to my massive walk-in closet and flicked on the light. I still hadn't been able to bring myself to go through all the clothes. It was too overwhelming. But I needed an outfit, one that made me feel brave.

My fingers ghosted over the rows of fabric, and I nibbled on the corner of my lip. I didn't have the first clue of what to choose.

I pulled out my phone and tapped out a text.

ME

What do girls usually wear to these parties? Jeans or something fancier?

I stared down at my phone, waiting for a response.

CONNOR

It's a Prep party. They go all out.

ME

So...like a dress?

CONNOR

Designer and the least amount of fabric possible.

I groaned. Not exactly what I was hoping for. Hoochy dresses were never going to be my thing, but I could find something that *was* me that would still fit in.

Moving to the section of the closet that held the dresses, I began assessing. There were more formal cocktail dresses, long gowns, and finally, chic party dresses. I examined each of them until I stopped on one.

Grinning, I held it up to the light. Perfect.

I quickly found a matching black lace bra and thong and put those on. Then I pulled the stretchy fabric over my head. It covered way more than Connor had suggested, but it hugged my curves perfectly. And when you looked closely, there were rips all over the dress, exposing a lace underlay.

The dress was me. I might be tattered and broken but there was a beauty to it. And it was time for me to own that.

A knock sounded on my bedroom door.

"Come in," I called as I exited the closet.

"It's me," Baldwin said as he entered. "I just wanted to see if you needed any help—"

His words cut off as he took me in.

I squirmed in place. "Is it okay? Not too much?"

Baldwin clasped his hands under his chin. "You look beautiful, Leighton."

I smiled. "Thanks."

"Do you want some help with your hair and makeup?"

My brows rose at that. "You can do that?"

He tossed invisible locks over his shoulder. "Girl, I was made for this mission."

I laughed. "Good, because I am definitely not."

BALDWIN'S PHONE buzzed on the counter, and he swiped it up. He pressed his lips together in an attempt to keep his smile at bay, but he failed. "Declan's here."

My stomach flip-flopped. We'd heard the other guys arrive home about thirty minutes ago, but Baldwin had refused to let them in my room.

He gripped my shoulders and squeezed. "Ready?"

My mouth went dry. "I'm honestly not sure."

"Up." Baldwin helped me rise and turned me toward the mirror.

I blinked as I took in the reflection in front of me. I never would've recognized myself. The dress was only the beginning. My red hair was curled into wild waves that cascaded over my shoulders and chest. Baldwin had given me a smoky shadow that made my eyes look way larger and the green blaze in them impossibly brighter. And whatever he'd done to my lips made them look like plump, glossy berries.

My eyes glistened. "Thank you," I whispered.

"Oh, no," he chided. "There will be no crying. You'll ruin all my hard work."

I threw my arms around him. "Thank you for being so kind to me."

Baldwin answered my hug. "It was my honor."

A doorbell sounded from downstairs.

"You better get going. I'd hate to have to try to get blood out of the marble floors in the entryway."

I winced and grabbed my clutch, hurrying from the room.

Voices sounded from downstairs, and I picked up my pace, careful not to go tumbling since I was wearing heels.

The second my shoes sounded on the hardwood, five sets of eyes found me, and everyone froze.

I swallowed but forced myself to keep moving. By the time I reached the bottom of the steps, I wanted to run and hide.

Declan blinked a few times, then stepped forward. "You look amazing."

"Thank you," I said, but my voice barely lifted above a whisper.

Dash grinned at me. "Pretty sure I just had a stroke."

Trace's eyes swirled and flashed as his jaw locked. "It's a little much, don't you think?"

Colt sent a hard elbow into his side. "What he means is that looking as breathtaking as you do, you might get more attention than you're ready for."

I licked my suddenly dry lips. For the first time in years, I felt beautiful, and I didn't want to lose that.

Declan slipped his hand into mine and squeezed. "I'll be with her. She'll be fine."

Ronan's gaze hardened on his brother. "Because your word is so trustworthy."

A muscle in Declan's cheek popped. "More trustworthy than yours."

"Don't fight. Please." I looked between the two of them. "I just want one night where I can pretend to be normal. Just for a little while."

Ronan stepped forward, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "You'll never be normal. You're far too extraordinary for that."

DECLAN GLANCED over at me as he turned his Mercedes G Wagon onto a gravel road. The headlights from the Range Rover following us with four brooding alpha males inside flashed, illuminating the interior of our vehicle.

Declan's thumb traced circles on the back of my hand. "You ready for this?"

I grinned at him. "Probably not, but if I hate it, we never have to do it again, right?"

He answered my smile with one of his own. "And we can always leave and go get milkshakes if this is a bust."

"I'm a fan of milkshakes."

Declan parked and leaned over to press a kiss to the corner of my mouth. "Good to know."

A shiver ran through me at the same time heat pooled in my belly. It was a potent combination, and I wanted more.

Declan's eyes bled to silver. "We better go before I maul you in this SUV."

A laugh burst out of me.

"You're dangerous, Leighton," Declan said as he climbed out.

By the time I tried to open my door, Declan was already there, opening it for me. He held out a hand, and I took it gratefully. These heels and gravel would not be a good mix.

Doors slammed from two spots down, and Declan sighed. “Looks like your bodyguards made it.”

I winced. “Sorry about that.”

“Not your fault. I can’t even blame them. I’d want to make sure you were safe, too.” He slid my hand around his arm so that I could steady myself. “Let’s do this.”

We made our way toward the massive lodge with music pumping. People were everywhere. At bonfires by the water, on the wraparound porch, inside.

We headed up the front steps, and I was aware of the four guys at our back. Everyone turned to stare as we entered the house, and I fought the urge to squirm.

Declan dipped his head to whisper in my ear. “How about something to drink?”

I nodded. “Maybe a soda?” It was my first party, and alcohol didn’t seem like a good idea.

He smiled. “Sounds good.”

Declan led me over to a bar area with every kind of alcohol imaginable. He grabbed two Cokes from an array of sodas and handed me one. He clinked his can to mine. “Here’s to a night of firsts.”

I grinned. “Thanks for bringing me.”

“I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

I caught sight of movement out of the corner of my eye, but it was too late. The red solo cup was already airborne. A thick, red, sticky substance that resembled punch coated my entire body.

Chloe’s eyes flashed with mock-apology. “Oops. I tripped.”

I WASN'T sure how the substance coating my body was only a cupful. It was everywhere. In my hair, on my face, on my chest. I could taste some fruity mixture with a bite of alcohol.

“You fucking bitch,” Declan snapped.

Colt, Ronan, Trace, and Dash were in front of us in a flash.

Ronan gave Chloe a hard shove. “We warned you to stay away from Leighton.”

There was a flicker of unease in her eyes, and then the bravado was back. She tossed her brown locks over her shoulder. “Pretty sure it was you who got the warning today.”

I stiffened at that. I hadn't had a chance to ask the guys how their meeting was. Had they gotten in trouble?

Ronan prowled toward Chloe. “You think you hold the power, but you forget who truly does. Maybe you need a reminder.”

Mimi squeaked as she squeezed Chloe's arm. “Don't be an idiot.”

Chloe sent her friend a scathing look, then turned back to Ronan. “You can't touch me.”

A grin stretched across Ronan's face, but it was more than a little feral. “I could snap your neck so fast no one would even see me move. Right now, you're just annoying, a little incessant gnat, but if you try to hurt Leighton again, I will deal with you. And you won't like how I do it.”

Chloe went pale. “I-I'll tell my father.”

Trace laughed, a coldness to the sound. “Good luck with that, sweetheart.”

Declan took my arm. “Come on. We can get you cleaned up. They’ll deal with her.”

It was like a car wreck I couldn’t tear my eyes away from, but Declan led me toward the stairs and then up them. When I finally lost sight of the guys and Chloe, I looked down at myself, scrunching up my nose.

“It’s not that bad,” Declan assured me.

I scoffed. “I smell like Hawaiian punch and rubbing alcohol.”

He choked on a laugh. “Pretty sure that was a cup of Jungle Juice.”

My whole face contorted like I’d smelled something bad. “What’s that?”

Declan only laughed harder as he guided us into a bedroom and closed the door. “It’s this punch with grain alcohol and cut-up fruit. They make it in trash cans.”

“Who would drink something out of a trash can?”

“Far too many people to count.”

I stared down at myself. “So, you’re telling me I have trash can juice all over me?”

Declan shook his head with a grin. “At least you didn’t drink it.”

“There is that,” I mumbled.

“Here.” Declan opened the door to a bathroom and pointed to a stack of linens. “There are towels and washcloths you can clean up with.”

“Thanks.”

I stared at my reflection in the mirror. Gone was the beautiful canvas Baldwin had painted. Half my hair was now plastered to my face, and red punch had stained my skin in places.

“Maybe I should just go home,” I said.

Declan moved in behind me, squeezing my arms. “We can, but I hate the idea of her ruining the night.”

I did, too, but it might be a lost cause, anyway.

Declan reached over and grabbed a washcloth, wetting it. “May I?”

I nodded slowly.

Declan gently wiped away the sticky remnants on the side of my face, then my neck. Each brush of the soft cloth against my skin made my heartbeat pick up. He carefully pulled the strap of my dress down so that he could clean my chest.

That silver flared to life in Declan’s eyes as his gaze zeroed in on the swell of my breasts. His nostrils flared as he squeezed his eyes closed for a

moment.

“Dec?”

“You’re too beautiful. Too tempting for your own good.” He spoke the words as if he were pained.

I pressed a hand to his cheek, and Declan’s eyes opened. There were so many unspoken things in that gaze. I leaned in, just a breath away.

“Leighton,” he practically pleaded.

“Kiss me,” I whispered.

It was all Declan needed. He hauled me into his arms, and my legs wrapped around his waist.

There was no gentle brush of his mouth against mine. Declan took like a man starved. As if only my taste would satiate him.

He nipped my bottom lip, and I gasped. His tongue drove inside, and I pressed myself harder against him. I could feel every ounce of his response, muscles tensing, cock hardening. Everything about it made me feel powerful beyond measure.

“Leighton,” Declan groaned as his lips trailed down my neck. His teeth grazed my pulse point, hovering there, and I shuddered. I had the sudden burning need for him to bite me.

But Declan’s mouth kept moving. Lower and lower. Down my chest until my breast popped free of that black lacy bra. Declan’s lips closed around my nipple, and he sucked hard.

Light danced across my vision as an invisible cord pulled tight inside me.

What was happening?

I didn’t know, didn’t care, I just wanted more.

Then a deep and extremely pissed-off voice cut through my haze of need.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

It was Colt, and he’d just seen me practically dry humping a guy he hated.

“WHAT THE HELL is wrong with you?” Colt bellowed. “Leighton gets doused by Chloe, and you think it’s the perfect time to take advantage of her and get her clothes off?”

I squirmed, quickly righting my dress as my cheeks flamed. I could feel the gazes of the three guys behind Colt, and I wanted the earth to swallow me whole.

Declan’s eyes swirled to that beautiful silver, but fury blazed within them. “That wasn’t what happened. Just because you’re jealous doesn’t mean that you get to bulldoze in here and throw your judgment around.”

Colt’s nostrils flared. “I’m looking out for Leighton. She’s everything to me. She has been since we first met when we were five years old. Something *you* could never understand.”

“And whose fault is that?” Declan snapped. “You’re the one who kept us from her. You’re the one who—”

Colt’s fist snaked out so fast Declan didn’t have a prayer of blocking it. Colt connected with Declan’s jaw in a sickening crunch. And then mayhem erupted.

Ronan grabbed for Colt while Dash and Trace went for Declan. It was a flying tangle of limbs as Colt and Declan cursed each other and the guys held them back.

I skirted around them all and slipped out of the bathroom and then out of the bedroom altogether. Hurrying down the hall, I found a back staircase. I didn’t care where it led as long as it was away from them.

My heel caught the lip of a step, and I almost tripped. I cursed and quickly slipped off the stupid shoes. What had I been thinking wearing

them? This dress? What had I been thinking coming to this party at all? This wasn't who I was. Normal wasn't ever a part of my vocabulary.

Sounds of the party pulsed in my ears, but I eyed a back door and made a beeline for it. The back porch was full of couples making out, but I successfully dodged them all. Hurrying down the back steps, I breathed a sigh of relief as my feet sank into the dewy grass.

Picking up to a run, I headed for the trees. The moment I reached their cover, I slowed, breathing deeper. Tears stung my eyes as I wound my way toward the water. The moon was almost full, and it illuminated the inky black of the lake. The scene was beautiful. But that beauty did nothing to soothe the ache in my chest.

Every time I felt like I was making progress with the guys, something would blow up. Maybe you truly couldn't be friends with people of the opposite sex. My stomach flipped because I knew friendship wasn't the only thing I wanted from the five of them.

But it wasn't like there were a lot of options for friendship right now. That Sam girl had seemed nice. Maybe she was an option for a friend. Connor, too. Or I could go back to what I'd done before, disappearing into the crowd.

A twig snapped, and I whirled around.

My heart picked up speed as a figure stepped into the moonlight.

A sickly smile spread across Damien's face. He made a tscking sound. "Those idiots left a lost little lamb wandering the woods alone."

I swallowed hard as my pulse thrummed in my neck, but I refused to cower. "What do you want?"

His nostrils flared. "That god-awful stench off you for one."

My brows furrowed. "Sorry that you think I stink, but you can fix that by staying the hell away from me."

Damien laughed, but the sound was cold and ugly. "I don't think so. They think they control everything, that they get to have everything. But they don't."

My breaths came faster in short, little pants. I was going to have to run. Along the shoreline was my best bet. I could scream the moment the house was in sight. If worse came to worse, I could dive into the water.

"What are you thinking about, Little Lamb?"

My gaze jerked back to him. "How this whole evil of the night thing you've got going on is a little much."

Damien cackled as if that were the funniest thing he'd ever heard. "Leighton...you have no idea..."

He moved so fast he was nothing but a blur of motion. His fingers closed around my necklace chain, and he cursed as he yanked hard, breaking it from my neck.

"What the hell—?"

But it was too late. Damien grabbed me by the throat, squeezing hard. "You are going to learn your place, Little Lamb, and it's on your knees."

I clawed and scratched, kicking out and trying to free myself.

Damien squeezed my throat harder, cutting off my air.

Panic gripped me. This wasn't happening. I couldn't stop fighting.

A burst of energy surged somewhere deep, and my knee came up, landing right between Damien's legs. He let out a yowl of pain and released me.

The moment I was free, I started running. My lungs burned as I pushed my muscles harder. I could just make out the lights from the massive lodge. Just a little further.

I opened my mouth to scream, and a hand latched onto my hair, yanking me back.

I cried out in pain, trying to escape.

"Hasn't anyone told you?" Damien growled. "Never run from a predator."

His mouth opened, and his canines lengthened, gleaming in the moonlight. Everything in me froze as terror coursed through me. This wasn't happening. It had to be a nightmare, some sort of hallucination. Maybe I'd fallen and had some crazy concussion.

But then those teeth sank into my neck. Agony ripped through every nerve ending in my body. And all I could do was scream.

THE PAIN WAS A LIVING, breathing thing. Coursing through my system in waves of white-hot fire. Some part of me recognized that I was still screaming, my voice going raw, but I couldn't stop.

The world went hazy around me. The stars above blurred into brushstrokes of light, dancing across my vision.

A feral yell sounded, and suddenly, I felt Damien pulling back, releasing me. I crumpled to the ground in a heap. I tried to move, but it was no use.

A figure crashed through the trees and was on Damien in a flash. It took several beats for me to recognize Trace. It was the bright violet of his eyes that glowed in fury that made the realization hit me.

He moved with a speed that was otherworldly. His fist crashed into Damien's cheekbone, snapping his head back. But Damien recovered quickly, lashing out with a vicious kick to Trace's ribs.

Trace wasn't the slightest bit affected. He swept Damien's legs out from under him, following up with a one-two punch to his face and torso. But he didn't stop. Trace rained down blow after blow, showing no signs of tiring.

I tried to call out to get Trace to stop, so scared he would kill Damien. But it was then I realized I was still screaming. Screaming because the pain was still consuming my body.

Trace's brutal strikes didn't stop.

Thunderous footsteps sounded, and then four figures broke through the trees. Declan and Ronan went straight for Trace as Colt and Dash ran for me. They sank down to the ground, and Colt hauled me onto his lap.

“I’ve got you. You’re safe.” His face twisted in agony at my screams, but I couldn’t stop them. “Where does it hurt?”

I wanted to tell him *everywhere*, but I couldn’t get the words out.

“Colt,” Dash croaked as he pulled my hair away from my neck. “He bit her.”

Colt’s nostrils flared, and he struggled to keep his breathing even. “I should’ve let Trace end him.”

“We can’t,” Dash whispered. “It would mean war.”

Declan and Ronan struggled to pull Trace away from Damien’s crumpled form.

“Someone needs to tranq him,” Declan gritted out.

That only made Trace roar with fury.

“Enough!” Colt barked, getting to his feet with me in his arms. “We need to move now. Damien bit her.”

Ronan and Declan froze, rage pulsing in the air around them. Then everyone was moving. The twins muscled Trace through the woods. Colt carried me but paused to look at Dash. “Grab the keys from my pocket.”

Dash quickly did as instructed. “I’ll run ahead and get the Rover.”

I was still screaming, but no sound came out, only a hoarse whisper.

Colt nuzzled my face as he walked. “I’m so sorry.” He said the words over and over as if it were a prayer. But all I could feel was the pain. Blinding hot, as if I were burning alive.

A few moments later, we were piling into the SUV. Colt kept hold of me as Declan and Ronan climbed in on either side. Each tried to soothe me in their own way. Declan stroked my hair as Ronan traced invisible designs on my leg.

“She’s screaming,” Declan choked.

“He gave her the pain bite,” Colt gritted out.

Dash’s gaze snapped to the rearview mirror as he pressed the gas harder. “That’s against the code.”

“Like Damien gives a fuck,” Ronan growled.

I dipped in and out of awareness as Dash drove, and before I knew it, he was pulling to a stop. The doors of the SUV flew open, and everyone was moving.

I cried out as the lights of the house filled my vision. It was too bright.

“Shit,” Colt muttered. “We need to get her to her room and turn down the lights.”

He took the stairs two at a time, and then someone blessedly turned off the overhead lights. The pain in my eyes eased, but it did nothing to help the agony still coursing through the rest of my body.

“What can we do?” Declan whispered.

“I’ve got my herbs,” Dash called.

Colt tipped my head back as Dash pushed a glass to my lips. “Drink,” he encouraged.

The liquid tasted horrible, but I drank it down. Anything to help the pain.

Colt kept hold of me as the rest of the guys paced. Tears leaked from my eyes as the burning intensified.

“It’s not working,” Ronan barked.

Dash’s brow furrowed. “It might have been too long since the bite for it to take effect.”

Everyone cursed.

Colt’s gaze locked with Trace’s. “She needs you.”

Panic lit Trace’s features. “I-I can’t.”

“You’re the only one who can ease her pain. Would you really leave her like this?”

Agony that mirrored my own flashed in Trace’s eyes, and then he was moving. He ripped off his T-shirt, exposing a sea of ripped muscle. He gently took me from Colt’s arms.

The moment our skin touched, visions flashed in my mind. A couple looking down at a much younger Trace with disgust and derision. “*We can’t have your kind in our home.*” That image was replaced with something else entirely. It was me. Me and Trace. Skin slick with sweat, the scent of lust filling the air. I writhed beneath him, begging for release.

“Deep breaths, Little Bird. Deep breaths,” Trace crooned in my ear. “I’ve got you.”

It was all too much. The pain transformed into pleasure. But it was as if the sensory overload was too much for my body to handle, and my entire world went black.

A STEADY DRUMBEAT played against my cheeks. The vibrations of it coursed through me in waves. It was a delicious sort of pleasure. I could've drowned in the sea of it.

A moan slipped from my mouth, and whatever was beneath me tensed.

"We need to move her," a low voice said. "I can't risk overloading her system."

Strong hands shifted me, and my eyes blinked open. Familiar faces greeted me. But it was a shirtless Trace slipping from my bed that had me frowning.

Then memories assaulted me one after the other. Running through the woods, standing on the shoreline, Damien's attack.

I jerked upright, my heart hammering in my chest.

Colt's hands landed on my shoulders. "You're okay. Just breathe."

"D-Damien. He...bit me."

Colt sent a quick look at the guys, then his focus came back to me. "Someone slipped something in your drink. Pretty sure you were having some gnarly hallucinations. But Damien did try to attack you."

My fingers came to my neck, feeling for any sort of bite mark. There was nothing there. But I did feel the metal of a chain.

My brows pulled together. "He ripped this off me."

Dash shuffled his feet. "I went back to the clearing and found it. I replaced the chain with something stronger so it won't happen again."

I searched my mind, trying to make sense of what was truth and what was my brain's wild imaginings brought on by drugs.

My gaze settled on Trace again. He stood there shirtless, his ripped black jeans hanging low on his hips. I swallowed hard. “You stayed with me? You made it better...”

My second sentence wasn't a question. It was a statement. But in it held an infinite number of questions. *Why? Don't you hate me? How was it you who stopped my pain?*

Trace shrugged, pulling over the mask of indifference. “You were freaking the fuck out. Someone had to deal with you.”

Pain lanced through me, and I wasn't even sure why. Trace had made it clear he wanted nothing to do with me. My eyes narrowed on him as doubt crept in. I knew the expression he wore now was nothing but a façade. And as the memories of him beating Damien flashed in my mind, I wondered if everything else about his lack of care for me was, too.

I didn't look away from those violet eyes. “Thank you. For coming. For helping me. For staying.”

Trace's jaw worked back and forth. “Whatever.”

He started to retreat toward the door, and I gasped. It was as if there were some invisible string connecting us, and when Trace walked away, it wanted to rip my rib cage from my body.

Trace's back teeth ground together as he glared at Colt. “I told you.”

I rubbed at a spot along my sternum.

Declan crouched in front of me, then glanced over his shoulder. “Go now and go quick.”

Trace turned on his heel and darted from the room. Pain blasted through me, but Declan's mouth crashed into mine. He swallowed every ounce of that pain and teased pleasure from me instead. His tongue stroked mine, distracting my body from the pull to run after Trace.

I lost myself in the dance of Declan's mouth with mine until he finally pulled back. I blinked up at him, confused.

His hands framed my face, thumbs sweeping across my cheeks. “How do you feel?”

I did a mental survey of my body, expecting to feel a million different aches and pains. But instead, I felt...good. Not even my feet hurt, and running barefoot across a forest should've left them more than a little tender.

“I feel good. But that doesn't make sense.”

Ronan cleared his throat. “We gave you some meds last night, and you slept really hard. That’s probably why.”

What kind of meds did they have their hands on? Because this was more like miracle healing.

I glanced at the clock. It was after ten. I’d probably slept for almost twelve hours. I guessed that could be part of it.

My stomach twisted as the memory of Damien’s face filled my mind.

Declan squeezed my leg. “What is it?”

I swallowed, trying to clear the dryness in my throat. “What happened to Damien?”

The guys all shared a look.

“Oh God, he’s not dead, is he?”

“He should be,” Ronan muttered.

Colt rubbed a hand up and down my back. “He’s fine. We filed a report with that group we’re a part of. We didn’t want to get the police involved since your custody situation could be a little bit dicey.”

My stomach twisted. The last thing I wanted was someone trying to send me back to Louisiana and Maryanne. “No police.” But I hated the idea that Damien might just get away with this, that he might do it to another girl.

Colt seemed to read my thoughts. “We don’t have a lot of recourse because it was just the two of you on the beach. Damien is arguing that you went with him willingly.”

My jaw dropped. “I didn’t. I didn’t even know he was out there.”

Declan’s thumbs swept across the bare skin of my thighs. “We know. And Trace told them that Damien was violent toward you, but...”

“But what?” I pressed.

“We’re known for not getting along,” Ronan said. “The Assembly takes that into account.”

Dash moved in closer. “But they’ll be keeping a closer eye on Damien, and that’s a good thing.”

I looked up at him, my fingers closing around the locket. “He hated this. Why?”

A muscle along Dash’s jaw fluttered. “The herbs I used help with protection. If someone wished you harm, they wouldn’t like it.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” I argued. “Herbs can’t keep someone away.”

Dash’s gaze bored into mine. “They can if you believe.”

I SCRATCHED under Briar's chin as she nuzzled me, purring. "I wish I could take you to school with me."

Just the word *school* had my stomach churning. I had no idea what to expect.

Yesterday had been a quiet day. After I'd showered and donned sweats, the guys had ushered me into the movie theater in the basement. It was full of these massive couches with equally large ottomans that all felt like clouds. Colt, Ronan, Dash, and even Declan rotated in and out all day. They brought food down as we watched superhero movie after superhero movie.

When one or two of them left at a time, they never said where they were going, just that they had to take care of something. But they always came back. The only one who stayed away was Trace.

Just thinking his name had a faint pull tugging in my chest.

But he was the least of my worries. Not when I'd be heading back to the halls of Castle Prep. There'd be Chloe and her minions. And Damien.

My mouth went dry at the thought of him, and my heart rate sped up. I squeezed my eyes closed. I was safe. Nothing would happen to me on school grounds in broad daylight. And I was sure the guys would be sticking close after the events of the weekend.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped away from Briar, who let out a grumble of complaint.

"I'll be back before you know it."

She sighed and curled up into a ball, staring out the window.

I grabbed my backpack and headed downstairs. The guys, minus Declan, were all waiting.

Colt smiled, but I could read the strain around the edges. “You ready?”
I nodded.

Dash moved in close to me, weaving his fingers through mine. “You won’t be alone today, okay? We’ll meet you at each class and walk you to the next.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I argued.

“We’re doing it,” Ronan said, his voice going gruff.

Trace didn’t say a word. He simply stared at me. But I swore there was a flash of longing in those violet eyes.

“We better get going,” Colt said.

I followed them out to the Range Rover, my legs feeling heavier with each step.

We took our usual seats in the SUV, and the drive to school was mostly quiet. But my gaze kept drifting to Trace, his focus locked on the road in front of us. I had the bizarre urge to crawl over the console and into his lap, to get as close to him as humanly possible.

“Tone it down, Trace,” Ronan grumbled.

His jaw ticked. “I can’t control it. If you want to blame someone, look at Colt.”

Colt’s fingers tightened on the wheel. “We didn’t have a choice.”

My gaze ping-ponged around the vehicle, trying to read between the lines.

Dash squeezed my hand. “I think we should make the movie marathon a weekly thing.”

I smiled but shook my head. “I’ll never catch up with my schoolwork if I do that.”

He shrugged. “Just one movie, then.”

“I’m down for that. Baldwin’s array of snacks is pretty unparalleled.”

Colt pulled into his parking spot, and we climbed out of the SUV. The moment we did, I was aware of the stares. My stomach twisted as students bent to whisper in each other’s ears.

The guys tensed, surrounding me like they were bodyguards.

Declan strode across the lot toward us, a seriously pissed-off look on his face.

Colt’s gaze cut to him. “What’s going on?”

His jaw worked back and forth. “Damien’s using the gossip mill to try to win his case.”

A lead weight settled in my stomach. I closed my eyes for a moment and breathed deep. It didn't matter what people thought of me. I reminded myself of that over and over.

Forcing my eyes open, I turned to the guys. "We should get to homeroom."

As we started toward the front doors of the school, the whispers grew.

"I heard she was begging him for it and then screamed attack," one girl said to another.

Ronan halted and glared at them, sending them skittering back.

"What a bitch," another guy muttered. "She could've gotten him expelled."

Dash and Declan ate up the ground as they moved toward the group of guys. Declan zeroed in on the ringleader. "What was that?"

"N-Nothing, man, swear."

My palms dampened. This would never work. They couldn't threaten people to stop talking about me.

Chloe, Mimi, and Grace stepped into our path. Chloe grinned. "Looks like your little princess isn't so angelic after all, Colt. She's a common whore just like her mother."

Colt let out a low growl. "You never learn, Chloe. But you're going to —"

I couldn't take it. Couldn't listen to one more attack or a defense that wouldn't do any good. I darted around them all and headed to the side of the school building.

All my adventures in trying to escape the drama had given me a better understanding of where everything was in the school. I knew if I went in the back door, I wouldn't be far from my homeroom, and I could avoid all of *this*.

I felt Trace's presence at my back more than heard it. It was as if my body was finely tuned to his location at all times now. Annoyance fluttered to life in my chest, and I whirled on him. "What do you want?"

He skidded to a halt, his jaw ticking. "To make sure you don't get fucking attacked again and we have to clean up the mess."

I gaped at him. "Are you seriously blaming me for that?"

"No"—he spun, kicking at the trash can that tumbled over on its side—"of course it isn't your fault. I just—"

“You what?” I threw my arms wide. “What do you want from me, Trace? To drop dead? To run back to Louisiana and get the crap kicked out of me on the daily? What?”

His hands fisted at his sides. “I want you to be safe.”

I stilled. “Why?”

“Because I need it.” Each word rumbled out of his chest as if he had no control over them.

“Why?” It was like I could only say that one word.

All the air bled out of Trace. “You won’t understand.”

“Try me.”

He shook his head. “There are things I can’t explain.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming. “Then tell me what you can.”

Trace stared at me for a long moment. “I know what it’s like not to be wanted. To have the people who were supposed to love you hate the very sight of you.”

My ribs constricted around my lungs as the memory of the vision from the night before flashed in my mind.

“It’s some of the worst kind of pain,” he said quietly.

“I’m sorry.”

His jaw tightened. “I don’t need your pity.”

“It’s not pity. It’s empathy. Isn’t that what you feel for me?”

Trace’s breaths grew labored as his knuckles bleached white. “I feel a hell of a lot more than empathy for you, Little Bird.”

My own breath hitched, that pull to him intensifying.

Trace stumbled back a few steps. “Stay away from me, Little Bird. I’ll ruin you.”

I STARED after Trace as he disappeared around the building. Each step of distance physically hurt. But it was more than that. My heart ached for him, the guy who thought he was nothing but bad. I knew that wasn't true. I'd seen it with my own eyes when he'd stepped in to deal with Damien.

Footsteps pounded on the stone path, and I turned to see Dash hurrying toward me, concern etched into his face. "What happened?"

I shook my head, unsure of how to even explain that exchange. "Just Trace."

Dash frowned but seemed to instantly understand. He wrapped his arm around me and guided me along the path. "It's not you. He has demons..."

"We all do." It was something I'd only truly learned since coming to Emerald Bay. Every person that walked this earth was scarred by something. It was how we dealt with those scars that mattered.

Dash dipped his head and pressed a kiss to the top of mine. "You're right about that. I just don't want you to take Trace's actions personally."

I rubbed at that spot along my sternum. "It's a little hard not to."

Dash's eyes tracked the movement of my hand. "You okay?"

I instantly dropped my arm. "Fine. Just not entirely looking forward to a day in the gossip mill."

"They're morons," he grouched. "They know what a manipulative asshole Damien is. Spreading his lies just reveals them to be the sheep they are. No, lemmings. Did you know that lemmings will blindly follow each other, even over a cliff?"

I grinned up at Dash. "How does your brain hold all that knowledge?"

His cheeks pinked. "I've always just had a thing for facts."

I pressed tighter against him. “I love it. It’s comforting to me that you’ll always have all the answers.”

Dash chuckled, the sound wrapping around me in a caress. “I doubt that.”

He opened the back door and ushered me inside.

As we stepped into the back hallway, I froze. Damien stood outside a classroom about twenty feet away, talking to his minions, Lucien and Caspian. His gaze jerked to me instantly, and his eyes darkened. There was no sign of any of the injuries I knew Trace had to have inflicted. But maybe my mind had embellished that, too.

But when Damien’s lip curled in a snarl, I knew that wasn’t true.

I SLID out of the SUV after Ronan and had to fight not to collapse to the cobblestone drive. This had been one of those *no good, very bad* days. The whispers and lies hadn’t stopped all day. Girls shot *slut* and *whore* at me under their breath. And I’d lost track of all the lewd comments from the guys. Ronan had punched one of them in the middle of the hallway, and that had tempered things for a bit, but not long enough.

He took the backpack from my shoulder as he glanced down at me. “You okay?”

“Long day.”

He nodded. “What would help?”

Sleeping for a week? Moving to Antarctica? Then it hit me. “I need to cook.”

Ronan grinned. “That we can do. Want to change first?”

I nodded. I wanted out of this uniform as soon as humanly possible.

I followed the rest of the guys into the house, not missing that Trace immediately disappeared, and hurried to my bedroom. I gave Briar a quick cuddle and then changed into comfy sweats.

Heading downstairs, I pulled up short as Declan walked through the front door. He’d changed out of his uniform, too. He wore low-slung joggers and a white tee that clung to those planes of muscle.

He grinned. “Hey. Missed you.” Bending, he brushed his lips across mine.

It was far too tempting to sink into that kiss, but I managed to pull back. “You’re here?”

I said it more like a question, even though it was clearly a statement.

Declan instantly understood my confusion. “We talked. I’ll be here more now.”

Warmth spread through me at the thought of all of my guys being in one place. Guilt pricked at me as soon as the thought entered my head. They weren’t mine. Even though I wanted every single one of them to be.

I wove my fingers through Declan’s and squeezed. “I’m glad you’re here.”

He kissed the tip of my nose. “Me, too. So, what’s the plan?”

“I’m going to cook.”

Declan’s eyes flared. “Really? I love to cook.”

A smile spread across my face. “I wouldn’t have guessed that.”

Ronan rounded the corner. “Good news, bad news. Baldwin already went to town in the kitchen, so we’re probably set on food for the next decade, but—”

He pulled up short as he caught sight of Declan. The easygoing expression on his face morphed into one of instant guardedness. “Didn’t know you were here already.”

Declan gave his brother a chin lift. “Thanks for letting me come.”

Ronan’s back teeth ground together. “I’d do anything for Leighton.”

Oh, hell. He was making it clear this wasn’t acceptance on his part. Something about that crushed me. I hurried to change the conversation’s direction. “If cooking’s out, what should we do?”

“Swim,” Colt said, striding into the entryway.

My jaw went slack as I took him in. Colt wore low-slung board shorts that exposed that V of muscle, and I had the sudden urge to trace it with my tongue.

He chuckled. “You’re staring, LeeLee.”

I jerked out of my daze as my face flamed. “Isn’t it too cold to swim?”

Colt shook his head. “Pool’s heated, and we’ve got the hot tub, too.”

I worried the corner of my lip. “I don’t have a swimsuit.” But it was more than that.

“Carly sent a bunch. They’re in the pool house with the towels.”

Crap.

Declan’s thumb drew circles on the back of my hand. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m just not sure I’m up for swimming.”

Colt frowned at me. “You love swimming. Your dad would have to bribe you to get out of the water when we were little.”

I swallowed hard. “I guess things change.”

Worry creased Declan’s brow. “Your pulse is going crazy, and your breathing’s fast. It’s more than that.”

Why did these guys have to be so damn astute?

Ronan dipped his head so that he met my gaze. “What’s wrong? You know you can tell us anything.”

Now that they knew something was wrong, they wouldn’t let up.

My gaze dropped to the marble entryway, tracing the gray lines that looked like stormy lightning bolts. “I don’t want you to see my scars.”

DECLAN SUCKED in an audible breath at my words. Ronan growled like he wanted to tear something, or *someone*, apart. And Colt was silent.

A second later, rough hands cupped my face. Ronan gently forced my head up. His eyes searched mine. “There is nothing you need to hide from us.”

I battled to keep my tears at bay. “They’re bad. I hate the way they look.”

Colt closed in so that I was surrounded by the three of them. “LeeLee. There’s nothing about you that isn’t beautiful. Those scars just show how damn strong you are.”

Declan nuzzled the side of my neck. “He’s right. You’re a miracle. Every inch of you.”

My heart hammered against my chest. “I’ve never let anyone see them before.”

I’d always been so determined to hide them from everyone around me. The thought of willingly exposing them to someone was completely foreign. But I missed swimming. I’d never felt freer than when I was consumed by the water, weightless and unencumbered.

“Trust us,” Colt whispered. “We have you.”

“Okay.” The single word was barely audible, but a cannon shot at the same time.

Colt beamed. “Come on. I’ll show you where the suits are and where you can change.”

Before I knew it, he had my hand and was guiding me outside and toward the pool house that stood to the side of the yard. My gaze ate up the

space that was like a house in its own right. Expertly decorated with high-end finishes, it seemed like a waste that no one lived here.

Colt moved to a closet and pulled out a few hangers. “Here’s what Carly sent.”

I gaped at the bikinis, more importantly, at the lack of fabric. “I’ll be lucky if those cover my nipples.”

Colt barked out a laugh. “Not gonna lie, LeeLee, wouldn’t mind if you just skinny-dipped.”

My jaw dropped.

He crossed to me, his thumb sweeping across my cheek and then trailing down my neck. “Did I scandalize you?”

My breath hitched. “N-no.”

His grin only widened. “I’m going to force myself to leave right now because if I don’t, I’m gonna do something I’m not sure you’re ready for.”

I swallowed hard, any attempt at words sticking in my throat.

I stared at the door Colt disappeared out of for at least a count of ten.

“What just happened?” I whispered to the empty room.

Shaking myself out of my stupor, I focused on the bathing suits. Carly had done great with most of the clothes she’d sent, but if I saw her again, we were going to have words about what constituted a bikini. I did not need butt floss for a bathing suit.

Pulling them all off the hangers, I mixed and matched the bottoms and tops that had the most coverage. I slipped into the bathroom and got changed. Stepping back, I took in my reflection. The top at least covered my boobs, but it also pushed them up, making me look like I had more cleavage than I actually did. I thought about turning around to make sure my whole ass wasn’t on display, but I didn’t want to see the mangled skin on my back. I was worried if I did, I’d never go out to the pool.

Grabbing a towel, I wrapped it around myself and pulled it tight. Now or never. I hurried out the door before I could stop myself. The guys were already out there. Colt, Ronan, and Declan were in the water, shooting basketballs into a floating hoop. Dash was standing by an elaborate display of snacks, popping something into his mouth. And Trace was reclined on a lounge, sunglasses in place.

My breath hitched as I took them all in, each one beautiful in their own way. But Trace’s tattoos had me hypnotized. He was completely covered in

them. There were drawings and words, but I was too far away to make them out.

“Like something you see, Little Bird?”

Trace’s words were a taunt, but I refused to be embarrassed.

I met his stare dead on. “Your tattoos are beautiful.”

His jaw hardened as if he would’ve much preferred I sniped back at him.

Colt flicked some water at me. “Get in. Water’s perfect.”

My mouth went dry at the thought of exposing myself, but Colt’s earlier words played in my mind. “*Trust us.*”

I let the towel drop, and five sets of eyes bored into me.

Dash’s hand holding a chip and dip froze halfway to his mouth. “Holy hell,” he muttered.

Declan coughed. “If this is hell, sign my soul over to the Devil.”

Ronan’s lips twitched.

Their attention was too much. So, I did the only thing I could. I dove into the water.

Colt was right, even though the air was crisp, the water was heavenly warm. When I burst to the surface, I felt instantly lighter.

Colt grinned at me. “You haven’t lost your form.”

I laughed. “I can still kick your butt in a race, too.”

He arched a brow. “We’ll have to see about that.”

He swam over to me, arms going around my waist.

I tried not to tense, knowing that his hands would feel the mangled skin. But the moment his fingers ghosted over my scars, I couldn’t help but freeze.

Colt didn’t let that deter him. He traced the scars. “Breathe, LeeLee. I’ve got you.”

Dash slid into the water next to us and moved to my side. His lips skimmed over my shoulder, sending an array of shivers across my skin. “So damn beautiful.”

“More beautiful than anything I’ve ever seen,” Declan said gruffly as he pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth.

Ronan rounded behind me, and I fought the urge to sink beneath the surface and hide. His head dipped, and his lips ghosted over the skin I’d never shown anyone. He didn’t stop until his mouth had caressed each inch.

My breaths came in quick pants as pleasure and pain ricocheted through me.

“The most beautiful strength I’ve ever seen,” he whispered against my skin.

I leaned back against him, surrounded by the four of them like it was as natural as breathing. And then my eyes locked with Trace.

His sunglasses were dark as night, but I could still sense those eyes on me, and I couldn’t look away. And as four pairs of hands skimmed over my skin, I couldn’t help yearning for one more.

SOMETHING HAD CHANGED YESTERDAY. As if I'd taken a step closer to all the guys, even Trace, despite the fact that he kept his physical distance. No one had truly crossed any significant lines, but the casual touches had grown more and more affectionate. And no one seemed to mind that they were all touching me.

But it all felt precarious. I couldn't see how that would actually work. And I was too scared that if I asked, my closeness with all of them would disappear.

Colt guided the Range Rover down the two-lane highway as Ronan's finger traced the hem of my over-the-knee socks. He tugged at the hem. "I like these."

His voice was a growly caress, and I fought the urge to press my thighs together in an attempt to relieve the ache building there. The ache that had been building since yesterday afternoon.

Colt's fingers tightened on the wheel. "Do you want me to drive this SUV off the road?"

Ronan chuckled. "Gotta work on your self-control, Colt."

Dash's hand dipped beneath my hair, squeezing my neck. "Don't tease her, Ronan."

Ronan's chuckle morphed into a mischievous grin. "But I like teasing."

His fingers trailed up the inside of my thigh, and I started panting.

"Pull over," Trace growled.

Colt cursed but made a hard right onto a gravel side road.

"Eyes on me, Leighton," Ronan whispered.

My gaze went to him as if he controlled it.

“Can I touch you?”

My mouth opened and closed, and then I licked my lips.

Trace let loose a stream of curses.

“I haven’t—no one’s...” I didn’t know how to finish that statement.

Ronan’s eyes went liquid gold. “No one’s touched you?”

I shook my head.

A smile curved his mouth. “You aching?”

I nodded again. “Since yesterday.”

Ronan’s hand skimmed higher. “I bet. All these hands on you, no one to take away the pain... Did you touch yourself last night, Leighton?”

I swallowed hard. “No.”

“Did you want to?”

“Yes.” It was a whispered confession brought on by need.

Ronan’s finger ghosted over my lace panties. “Firecracker, you’re soaked. You need me?”

“Yes.” It was more of a breath than a word, but it was all Ronan needed.

His fingers slipped around the fabric and to my core.

My head fell back, and it was then I realized that Dash’s hand was still around my neck, his fingers still kneading the muscles there. The fact that he hadn’t let go and there were two sets of hands on me... It only heightened every sensation.

Ronan’s finger dipped and circled, teasing and exploring. Everything in me wound tighter. Then a finger slid inside, and I gasped.

“Hell,” he muttered. “So damn tight.”

A little whimper escaped my lips.

“Need more, Leighton?”

I mumbled something that resembled a yes.

“Unbutton her shirt, Dash,” Ronan ordered.

Dash’s fingers slipped from my neck and moved to the buttons on my blouse. A second later, my chest was exposed.

“She’s gonna kill me,” Dash muttered.

“Help our girl,” Ronan said as his finger curled inside me, sending a new flood of wetness.

“I can smell her,” Colt growled.

Ronan grinned. “Can’t fucking wait to taste her.”

Dash pulled down the cup of my bra, and his thumb circled my nipple. It lengthened and peaked, as if seeking more of him. “Look at all the blood

rushing to the surface. So many nerve endings just waiting for more.”

He dipped his head, and his mouth closed around my nipple. He sucked hard, and my hips bowed off the seat. As they did, Ronan slid a second finger inside me. There was a stretch and a hint of burn, but as Dash’s teeth skated along that tight bud, it melted into pleasure.

My hips started to move of their own volition, seeking more, of what, I wasn’t sure.

“So beautiful. Knows just what to do,” Ronan said in awe.

His thumb circled my clit, making everything spark to life inside me. It was as if there were a part of me that had been dead, and it was now coming to life for the very first time.

“She needs more,” Colt gritted out. “Give her more on her clit. Press down.”

Ronan did as ordered, and the world around me tilted.

A wave of some invisible energy pulsed through me. My mouth opened in a silent scream as my body rocked. My core clamped down on Ronan’s fingers like a vise, wanting to pull him impossibly deeper. The waves didn’t stop, one after the other, crashing through me like an avalanche of sensation.

Ronan’s fingers didn’t stop, wringing every last ounce of pleasure out of me as Dash’s mouth worked my nipple.

Finally, everything slowed. My core still pulsed as I collapsed back onto the seat.

Dash released my breast, slipping it back into my bra and buttoning my shirt. Ronan’s fingers slid from my body. His eyes locked with mine as he brought them to his mouth and licked them clean.

Trace let out a strangled sound and shoved open his door, taking off for the woods.

The happy buzz fled my system, and I suddenly felt exposed.

Colt leaned between the seats, his hands framing my face. “Don’t. Don’t let him ruin this. It was beautiful.”

Pressure built behind my eyes. “Isn’t it wrong? I...I feel something for all of you. I don’t know how that’s possible, but—”

Colt cut off my words with a kiss. It was sweet and tender, like coming home. He pulled back, his eyes boring into mine. “Trust us, trust yourself. Maybe we’re all meant to be.”

That traitorous hope flared to life inside me. “How?”

Ronan squeezed my thigh. “We’ll figure it out. Just take things one step at a time.”

Dash dropped a kiss to my shoulder. “He’s right. One step at a time. And right now, that step needs to be getting to school, or we’re all going to get detention.”

Colt cursed and threw the Range Rover in drive.

“What about Trace?” I asked, scanning the woods for any sign of him.

“He’s gonna need a bit,” Ronan muttered.

I bit my lip.

Dash wove his fingers through mine. “It’ll work out. I promise.”

But I wasn’t quite so confident.

Colt made it to school in record time, screeching into his parking spot.

Declan was waiting for us when we got there, and he arched a brow. “Looks like you’re missing the fourth musketeer.”

“Don’t ask,” Colt muttered.

“All right.” As Declan approached me, his nostrils flared, and he breathed deep. He swallowed hard. “Looks like I missed all the fun.”

Could he seriously smell that?

Then he bent and fastened a button on my shirt. “You missed one,” he said, voice going husky.

I flushed. At least it wasn’t my scent giving me away.

Declan slung an arm over my shoulder. “Let’s go, gorgeous.”

“I need to grab my bio notebook from my locker.”

Declan nodded, and we all made our way through the halls. The whispers had thankfully lessened. But a chill skated down my spine as we passed Damien, Lucien, and Caspian. Damien’s eyes narrowed on me. Ronan stepped into his line of vision, blocking me, but I didn’t breathe easier until we’d rounded a corner.

Declan dipped his head. “He won’t touch you again. I promise.”

But he couldn’t make that vow. Who knew what Damien would stoop to.

We came to a stop at my locker, and I keyed in the code. Opening it, I gasped. Nausea swept through me at the sight.

A rat had been sliced open, and its insides spilled over the contents of my locker. And someone had written in blood on the inside of the door.

YOU DON’T BELONG TO THEM.

THE WORLD TUNNELED. There was nothing but the awful scene in front of me. The blood.

But through the roaring in my ears, I heard muffled curses, and someone turned me away from the sight in my locker.

“Get her out of here,” Ronan barked.

An arm went around me, and some part of my brain recognized Dash. “Just breathe. Nice and easy.”

I struggled to obey, but my stomach roiled, the scent of death still coating my airways. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

Dash swore and quickly tugged something out of his pocket. “Breathe through your nose.”

I forced myself to do so, even though my body battled against it. The scent of peppermint filled my nose. Clean. Soothing. The worst of the nausea eased.

“We need to keep moving,” Colt said in a low voice.

Suddenly, I was aware of all the attention focused squarely on us.

Declan pressed in on my other side. “Can you walk?”

I nodded. My legs were shaky, but the last thing I needed was the entire school seeing one of the guys carrying me out of here. I forced myself to move, to start walking. Declan, Dash, and Colt surrounded me, and the murderous looks on their faces had everyone scampering out of our path.

The walk to the Range Rover was a blur. I was barely aware of Dash and Declan loading me in and buckling my seat belt as Colt climbed behind the wheel. No one said a word as we drove.

Seconds later, two other blacked-out Range Rovers circled us on the road. One took up the position in front, the other behind us. My heart picked up speed. Did we need to be this worried? To have security meet us on the ten-minute drive from campus?

Then an image of the contents of my locker filled my mind, and I nearly lost my breakfast.

Dash pressed the little satchel to my nose again. “Keep breathing.”

The scent of peppermint was back, lessening the worst of the roiling in my stomach.

Declan rubbed a hand up and down my back. “We’ve got you.”

I noticed he didn’t say I was safe. Probably because it had been proven time and again that I wasn’t.

The gates to The Nest opened as we approached, and the two Range Rovers peeled away for us to enter. As Colt pulled to a stop in front of the house, Baldwin charged outside, worry carved into his face.

Declan and Dash helped me from the SUV, and Baldwin was on me in a second. “Are you okay? What do you need?”

I didn’t have the words to answer him, but a shudder ran through me.

Dash wrapped an arm around me. “How about some tea? My sassafras blend?”

Baldwin nodded and hurried inside. “Get her in the lounge. There are blankets in there.”

The guys obeyed, guiding me toward the room I’d met Dash and Trace in my first night here. It felt like a lifetime ago.

The moment I sat, Declan wrapped me in the softest fuzzy blanket.

Colt crouched in front of me. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “It just—it’s awful.” I wasn’t particularly a fan of rats, but killing an innocent creature just to send me a message? It was disgusting.

His hands rubbed up and down my calves. “We’re going to figure out who did this. I promise.”

“It has to be Damien or Chloe. No one else hates me that much. Well, my mom, but she’s not here.”

The guys shared a look, something unreadable passing between them.

“What?” A little life flickered inside me. “It’s incredibly annoying when you do that.”

A small smile curved Dash’s mouth. “Sorry.”

“Tell me what’s going on.”

Colt sighed. “We can’t tell you everything and not because we don’t want to. But what I can tell you is that we have enemies. This could’ve been any number of people.”

A weight settled deep inside me. “Just because I’m hanging out with you?”

The front door slammed, and Colt was on his feet in a flash.

Footsteps thundered in the hall, and Trace skidded to a stop as he entered the room. His violet eyes blazed with a fury that stole my breath. “Move,” he barked at Colt.

Colt didn’t budge. “You need to take a breath. You don’t want to hurt her, Trace.”

“He won’t,” I croaked.

I wasn’t sure how I knew, but it was as certain to me as gravity.

“LeeLee...” Colt said.

“He won’t,” I pushed.

Colt swallowed, stepping out of Trace’s path.

Trace’s chest rose and fell in ragged breaths, as if each inhale and exhale was a battle he was barely winning. He took one step, then another, halting just shy of me, his gaze roaming over me. “Did they hurt you?”

His voice vibrated with rage.

I shook my head. “I’m okay.”

Trace swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Promise me.”

“I promise.”

He jerked his head in a nod, then whirled on Colt. “Where are we at?”

Colt squeezed his shoulder. “Not now.”

Anger blazed in Trace’s eyes, but he didn’t argue.

All of a sudden, exhaustion hit me like a ton of bricks. Dash seemed to sense it and wrapped an arm around me. “You okay?”

“I’m just so tired all of a sudden.”

He gave me a sympathetic smile. “Adrenaline crash.”

“Lie down,” Declan encouraged. He grasped my legs, placing them in his lap and taking off my shoes.

Dash put a pillow on his lap and positioned my head there. “We’ll stay with you. I promise.”

It was all I needed to let sleep claim me. Deeper than I’d had in a long time.

I didn't know how long I'd been under, but faint voices tugged at my consciousness. My eyelids were so heavy they didn't open right away, couldn't. So, I strained to listen.

Dash's hand stroked my hair, but I could feel that Declan was gone now. I heard Colt's voice, then Ronan's, and finally a third I didn't recognize.

"You should've called me immediately," he said.

"I called you after we got Leighton settled. *She* was our first priority," Colt argued.

The man let out a low growl. "And that's exactly the problem."

It was then I recognized the voice. Darius. The friend of Colt's father who was running the business.

"Call her a problem again and I'll burn every inch of skin from your body," Trace said. His voice was deceptively calm with almost a musical quality to it. But underneath was a menace that turned my blood to ice.

Darius muttered a curse. "You know what I mean. Her gift never manifested. She'll have no way to protect herself. I know that and so do you." He sighed. "You never should've brought her here."

FOOTSTEPS SOUNDED IN THE HALL, cutting off the conversation. I used them as an excuse to make a show of waking, but a million questions were running through my head. I shifted and stretched, my eyes blinking against the dim light in the room. The sun hung low in the sky outside the window. *How long had I been asleep?*

Dash helped me sit up. "How are you feeling?"

I didn't have a chance to answer before the rest of the guys were charging into the room.

"She's awake?" Declan asked.

"Clearly," Ronan grumbled.

"How do you feel?" Colt pressed.

But I couldn't help staring straight at Darius. The man who didn't think I should be here. But what gift was he talking about?

"I feel okay. Still a little sleepy but better."

"You need food," Dash said.

The only one of the guys who was silent was Trace, but he watched. So intently his gaze felt like a physical caress. It should've unsettled me, but instead, it made me feel nothing but safe.

"I'm not really hungry," I confessed.

Colt frowned. "You haven't eaten anything since breakfast."

"I'll eat later if I get hungry. Did you find out who left the rat in my locker?"

The room went charged at that, and I wanted to curse.

A muscle along Ronan's jaw ticked. "Not yet. We've got people on it."

Darius hadn't said a word, but his eyes hadn't left me once. His stare gave me the urge to go scrub my skin under the shower.

I gripped the edge of the blanket. "I think I'm going to go get changed. Maybe lie down a little longer."

Dash stared down at me. "Do you want me to come with you?"

I shook my head. "I'll be okay. Thank you, though." I just wanted out from under Darius's focus. Something about him set me on edge. And I needed time to puzzle through what I'd just heard. Time without six sets of eyes tracking my every move.

Colt helped me up, pressing a kiss to my temple. "I'll come check on you later."

"Okay."

I hurried out of the room, giving Darius a wide berth. It wasn't until I was on the stairs that I realized I'd left my shoes behind. Oh well.

When I opened the door to my room, Briar let out a loud meow and jumped off her cat tower. She'd always had a sixth sense when it came to knowing I needed a little extra TLC. I scooped her up and cuddled her to my chest.

"I have no idea what's going on, but I'm freaked out."

She meowed as if to answer.

I moved into the closet, perching her on the dresser in the middle. Something was going on. It sounded like the mob or some weird secret society. Who called themselves The Assembly, anyway? Darius's words played over and over in my mind as I changed out of my uniform and into sweats. "*Her gift never manifested.*"

What the hell did that mean? What gift? He'd mentioned not being able to protect myself... Dash had said he practiced martial arts. Maybe they were all into that and Darius knew I wasn't? That didn't seem reason enough to boot me out.

I scooped up Briar and made my way to my desk and the brand-new laptop perched on it. Sitting Briar on the desk next to me, I opened the computer. The first step to finding answers was research.

Guilt swirled in my belly, but I shoved it down. I needed to know what was going on.

I started with a simple search of the guys' names. But there was nothing. No news articles, not even for a sports achievement. No social media profiles anywhere. Not even a class picture. It was as if they'd been

erased from the internet altogether. I shouldn't have been surprised. Neither Colt's name nor his father's had ever come up in my searches over the years.

Worrying the corner of my lip, I stared at the screen. My fingers typed *The Assembly*. Only weird things came up that weren't local to Emerald Bay.

Maybe I needed to start with the town. I lost myself in sifting through article after article about the history of Emerald Bay. It was fascinating by itself, but then something caught my eye. *The Founding Families*.

I clicked on the link, and an old black-and-white photograph filled the screen. Six men stood gazing at the camera, unsmiling. Underneath the photo was a list of last names. *Carrington, O'Connor, Solace, Dumont, Laurent*. It was all the guys' last names and Damien's.

I'd known the guys were tied to the town, but this was another level.

I moved back to the search menu, and another article stopped me cold. Colt's father's name screamed at me from the list of articles. Why had this never shown up when I'd searched? Could someone block themselves from Google results? My hand trembled as I clicked the link.

Andrew Carrington Murdered, Drained of Blood, Police Have No Suspects. Everything in me went ice cold as my heart picked up speed. The memories of my attack played in my mind. The feel of Damien's teeth sinking into my flesh. I'd so readily believed the guys when they'd told me I'd been drugged. But what if they were lying?

My breaths came faster. I needed air.

Shoving back from my desk, I hurried out of my room and down the back staircase. It only took seconds for me to get outside. Darkness had descended, and the cool sea air was a welcome balm.

I pulled it into my lungs, trying to slow my brain as I walked toward the rocky cliffs. *Drained of Blood*. Nausea swept through me. Why hadn't Colt told me his father had been murdered? I'd been imagining him dying of a heart attack or cancer. Murder was a whole different ball game.

I stilled at the rocks. What about Dash's parents? Had they been murdered, too? Ronan and Declan's mom? I didn't know where Trace's parents were. Was there some crazy serial killer after them?

But far crazier thoughts filled my mind. Ones of fanged beasts that wanted to drain me.

The wind picked up, and I wrapped my arms around myself. The waves battered against the rocky shore in an angry rhythm.

Movement caught my attention just over the water. Some swirl of darkness. Gathering. Moving.

My chest constricted as the darkness took shape. It wasn't entirely human, but it wasn't a beast either. It was made entirely of shadow. The darkness formed legs and arms and a torso. The head had no face but even darker eyes. It moved with a speed that had me stumbling back.

It inhaled deeply, and a smile broke through that head of darkness, exposing jagged teeth. "Anchor..."

THE CREATURE'S voice had a wave of sickness crashing into me. His shadow arms curled out and tentacle-like fingers reached for me.

I screamed. The sound pierced the air like a bomb. So loud the creature itself jumped back. Then anger built in its eyes.

Some part of my brain, the area in charge of survival, spurred my legs into movement. I was running before I knew what was happening, charging for the safety of the mansion with everything I had.

Shadows swirled in the air, and the creature reformed in front of me again. "You can't run from me, Anchor."

This wasn't real. It couldn't be happening. I was hallucinating. I'd never wished for a brain tumor so much in all my life.

The creature's shadow arm extended again, and I tried to dodge it, but a finger grazed my shoulder. Ice-cold agony ripped through me, as if my soul were being ripped from my body. Another scream burst from me.

The doors to the mansion flew open, and Colt ran toward me. Terror and rage filled his face.

The creature whirled, grinning at Colt with nothing but those sick, jagged teeth dripping with what almost looked like black tar.

"Colt! No!" I screamed. But it was too late.

Colt launched himself at the creature, but mid-air he morphed. His clothing ripped to shreds as he changed from man to wolf in front of my eyes. Crashing into the shadow creature, he knocked it to the ground.

"Get Leighton!" Ronan yelled as he ran, Declan at his side. They leapt into the air, and I braced, expecting them to go furry, too. But they didn't. They morphed into something altogether different.

My heart stopped as two *dragons* appeared. One was a pitch-black onyx with a gold shimmer to its scales and wings and golden eyes. The other was white with a silver shimmer and eyes. They took flight, circling us from above.

But the creature had disappeared into nothing but a collection of wispy smoke, impossible to attack.

Trace and Dash skidded to a stop in front of me. Dash's hands were on my arms in a flash. "Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

It was then that I realized that I was freezing, the ice-cold pain still ricocheting throughout my body.

The creature formed for a moment right in front of us. "So powerful. So sweet." The black tar dripped from its teeth.

Purple energy bolts flew from Trace's hands as he shot them at the creature.

The creature simply cackled as he disappeared into wispy smoke again. But his voice filled the air. "You'll never keep her safe. We have her scent now."

Dash cursed and began chanting in a language I didn't recognize. His hands moved around us, and the air rippled as a bubble encased me.

A bellow sounded from the sky as gold fire scorched the earth where the shadows had been.

More cackling filled the air. "This one will feed us for decades. Such a sweet treat. I can practically taste her on my tongue."

The wolf snarled and charged, but by the time he reached the creature, it had disappeared again.

The white dragon dipped toward the ground in a beautiful arc of movement. His wings cut through the shadows, and the creature screamed.

"You'll pay for that. I'll take it out on your little anchor with pleasure."

Trace cursed, and more purple fire rose from his hands.

The creature's laugh filled the air. "You'll never stop us. Because we're everywhere darkness reigns."

My breaths came faster. Short, panicked pants as my brain tried to make sense of what my eyes were seeing.

The creature took shape again, this time behind Colt. I screamed to watch out, but it was too late. The creature formed a blade of sorts from his shadow and sliced at the wolf. Colt howled in pain but whirled to snap his jaws into the shadows.

The white dragon breathed a stream of silver fire at the creature, blasting him right in center mass.

The creature wailed, shattering into a million wisps of smoke.

The world around us went silent.

The bubble that had been encasing me dissipated. The dragons landed. The world turned; my breathing labored. Trace dropped his hands, the purple fire disappearing. And Dash's chanting had ceased.

But my heart rate hadn't slowed. It rattled against my ribs as if it might actually break free. "What. Are. You?"

MY CHEST HEAVED as I struggled to make sense of what was right in front of my eyes. The two dragons shimmered and then morphed back into Declan and Ronan. The wolf trembled and then did the same.

Colt cursed as he stood, hand covering himself. Dash hurried over to him. “How bad?”

“I’m fine,” he gritted out. “Check Leighton.”

His words made me realize that I, too, was shaking. That painful cold still wracking through me.

“We need to get inside,” Ronan clipped.

The fact that he, Declan, and Colt were all naked as the day they were born wasn’t even on the top ten list of shocking things of my night.

Guards stormed around the house, all dressed in black.

“Check the perimeter,” Colt ordered, and they took off across the property.

Trace ground his back teeth together as his eyes raked over me. “Did he touch you?”

I tried to clear my muddled thoughts. “What?”

“The shadow demon. Did. He. Touch. You?” Trace growled.

“H-he touched my shoulder.”

All the guys cursed.

“Come on,” Dash said, pressing a hand to my back. “Let’s get inside so I can treat you.”

I moved almost robotically. Some part of my brain recognized that shock was setting in. Dash guided me through the house, taking a path I

didn't recognize down a maze of hallways until we got to a large wood door.

Dash pressed his palm to a pad next to the door, and there was a series of sounds. A moment later, he opened the door.

Stepping inside, I gasped. The room was massive. Three of the walls were made of glass, letting the moonlight stream in and illuminating a secret garden. Plants of all kinds took over the space, ones that looked familiar and others that were completely exotic. Every color under the rainbow was present.

"Over here," Dash said, pushing me gently along.

He guided me to a lab area of sorts. There were microscopes and test tubes and equipment I didn't have the first clue about.

Dash sat me on a stool. "Take off your sweatshirt."

I eyed the rest of the guys. Declan, Ronan, and Colt had grabbed basketball shorts somewhere along the way, but Colt was clearly in pain.

I pushed to my feet, crossing to him in a flash. It was then that I saw the gash along his side. The blood coating the wound had turned black, looking so similar to whatever had been on that creature's teeth. "We need to get you to a doctor. That looks bad."

Ronan shook his head. "That's what we have Dash for."

I glanced over to see Dash mashing a series of ingredients into a mortar.

"I need to see where he touched you, Leighton."

There was none of the typically easygoing air in Dash's tone.

I slipped off my sweatshirt, and a litany of curses filled the air. I glanced down at my shoulder and gaped. Black shadows covered my skin like ink poured into a glass of water.

Trace crossed to me, leaning in but not touching me. "You need to move, Dash. This is a tracking mark. If we don't get it off in the next few minutes, it'll be with her for good."

Declan moved in beside me, taking my hand. "It'll be okay."

But something in his eyes told me he wasn't quite convinced of that.

"Tracking as in that thing will know where I am?" I squeaked.

Trace winced, and that was the only answer I needed.

Dash hurried over to me and gooped a paste over the shadowed area, not caring that he was getting it all over my tank top, too. He glanced at Trace. "We're going to need you."

Trace clenched his fists at his sides. "It's a bad idea."

“She won’t be able to handle the pain without you,” Dash said quietly.

Declan released my hand, stepping back for Trace to take his place.

Trace took one step and then another until he was just a breath away. But he still didn’t touch me.

Dash looked down at me, apology in his gaze. “This is going to hurt, but there’s no other way.”

Growls filled the room.

Dash glanced at Trace and nodded.

Trace took my hand, holding on as if for dear life. It was the first time I could remember him touching me. I knew he had that night I was attacked, but I couldn’t remember it clearly. The moment his skin connected with mine, warmth radiated through me. A wave of heat and tingly energy that made me want to rub up against Trace like a cat.

“I’m so sorry, Leighton,” Dash whispered, and then pressed his hand against my shoulder as he muttered words in that language I didn’t recognize.

Pain ripped through my body. That icy agony like when the creature had touched me but so much worse. A scream tore from my throat, and more hands were on me, keeping me from collapsing to the ground.

“How much more?” Colt yelled at Dash.

“I’m not sure. It’s a bad one.”

Wave after wave of pure torture cascaded through me.

Soft lips pressed to my temple. “Hold on, Little Bird. Just hold on.”

There was a snapping sensation deep within me, and then Dash released his hold. I did collapse then, into Declan’s waiting arms. He scooped me up and carried me to a stool, where he sat and settled me on his lap.

Echoes of the pain still coursed through me like tiny electrocutions.

Dash breathed heavily but then turned to Colt. “Let’s get this over with.”

Colt shook his head. “I can wait for you to get some strength back.”

“We’re not taking any chances. We do this now,” Dash argued.

Colt ground his teeth together but nodded.

My head nestled against Declan’s chest as I watched Dash paste a different concoction on Colt’s side. He pressed his hand to it and began chanting. Sweat broke out on Colt’s brow, and he braced himself on a table.

I wanted to stand, to go to him, to help ease him somehow.

Declan held me tighter. “He’ll be okay. I promise.”

A second later, Dash released Colt, and Colt's chest heaved. "Thank you."

Dash sank onto a stool, and Ronan shoved what looked like a glass of orange juice into his hand.

I scanned the room, stopping on every face as I went, trying to put the pieces together. "You're not human."

It wasn't a question.

Colt straightened, his breathing still slightly labored. "We're not."

My throat went dry, a new question playing on the edges of my mind for the first time, one that had been rising to the surface ever since I saw Colt morph into a wolf. "Am I human?"

Colt's gaze bored into mine. "No, you're not."

MY HEART RATE SPED UP, and my breathing turned to short pants. “Explain.”

It was the only word I could get out. The millions of questions swirling in my mind were all tripping over each other and tying themselves in knots.

Colt ran a hand through his hair, the different colors in it catching the light. “We all come from different supernatural families. Ones that have made their homes here for generations.”

“The founding families,” I croaked.

Surprise lit his eyes. “Doing some research?”

I flushed. “I knew something was going on, but you were being so secretive.”

Colt sighed. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t sure how, or when, to tell you. It should’ve been your father’s choice whether to let you in on this world.”

My heart thudded in my chest. “He was different, too?”

Colt nodded. “He wasn’t a supernatural himself, but he was a carrier of one of the lines. We’re all different species. I’m a wolf shifter.”

“Like a werewolf? It’s not a full moon.”

Trace snickered, and Ronan elbowed him.

“It doesn’t work like that,” Colt explained. “I can shift anytime I want—since the age of thirteen.”

“Oh.” I stared at the guy I’d known practically all my life. “Does it hurt?”

He shrugged. “It’s a good kind of pain.”

My gaze shifted to the rest of the guys, landing on Ronan. “You and Declan are dragons?”

The moment the words left my mouth, I started to laugh. It came harder and harder until tears streamed down my face. “Wolves and dragons? I’m losing my mind.”

Declan squeezed me tighter. “You’re not. It’s all real.”

“We’re dragon shifters,” Ronan explained. “All shifters gain their abilities around the age of thirteen, but it takes us longer to master our abilities because of our size and the whole flying thing.”

“The whole flying thing...” I echoed, still disbelieving, even though I’d seen it in action.

“I’m a caster,” Dash said, a little of that easygoing air making it back into his tone.

“Just don’t call him a witch like you called Colt a werewolf,” Trace muttered under his breath.

Colt smacked him. “She’s new to this. Cut her some slack.”

Dash gave me an encouraging smile. “Casters are very similar to witches with a focus on the earth as the source of our magic.”

“Magic...” It was as if all I could do was repeat back certain words.

I shook myself, trying to regain some of my focus as I turned my gaze to Trace. I remembered the purple lightning bolts that had erupted from his hands. “What are you?”

All amusement fled his face. “Incubus.” The single word held no emotion. Nothing beneath the three syllables at all. It was as if the word itself were dead.

I thought I’d heard the term before, but I couldn’t remember what it was. And it wasn’t like whatever I’d seen on a TV show or read in a book would be accurate. “What is that?”

Trace didn’t look away as he answered. “A demon.”

I swallowed hard. He’d called the shadow creature a demon. Trace was like that?

Colt moved toward me. “Not all demons are evil. It just means that they derive their power from the darkness in some way. Incubi get their power from sexual contact.”

I swallowed hard as I remembered the scene in the dark hallway at school. Trace bringing Mimi to climax and then cruelly cutting her down. He’d been using her. For power.

Trace’s gaze kept locked on me. “I told you to stay away from me. Told you I’m not good.”

“Stop it,” Dash chided, then turned to me. “If Trace doesn’t have that kind of connection for too long, he begins to starve. He would wither away into nothing at all.”

My face softened as empathy flooded me. I couldn’t imagine being forced into that sort of thing just to stay alive.

“I don’t need your pity,” Trace snapped.

“It’s not pity. But I am glad to understand you a little better.”

Trace’s jaw worked back and forth, but he stayed silent.

I turned back to Colt. “What am I?”

It was such a simple question but so weighted.

Colt took the stool next to me and Declan. “All of our kind form bonds. Typically, they’re of the same species, but they need to be matched in power. Sometimes, the leaders of each faction are too powerful to be paired with others of their kind.”

My gaze swept around the room. “You were paired together?”

Colt nodded. “When our abilities begin to manifest around thirteen, a mark develops.” He stood, sliding the waistband of his shorts down to reveal what looked like a birthmark in the shape of a crescent moon.

“You all have it?”

“Yes. We’ve known since it appeared that this would always be our brotherhood,” Colt said.

Declan’s arms tightened around me, and my heart ached for him. Because whatever the reasoning, he had been on the outside of the group.

“I don’t have a moon like that,” I said softly. I wasn’t sure if they thought I was a member of their group, but I wasn’t.

Colt’s expression softened. “I know.”

“Then what am I?”

“You’re an anchor.”

I’d heard that word more than once now, but it made no sense on its own.

“They are the cornerstones of our world. They balance our power and help our bonds unite. Without them, anyone with supernatural abilities would go insane over time. And each anchor is tied to a bond. Their strength must match their bond’s.” Grief swept over Colt’s face. “But not all anchors’ abilities manifest.”

My heart clenched as Darius’s words echoed in my mind. “*Her gift never manifested.*”

“Mine didn’t,” I said slowly.

Colt shook his head. “If it had, we would feel it, and a compass mark would’ve appeared somewhere on your body on your sixteenth birthday.”

Memories shot through me at Colt’s words. My mother’s fury when she realized it was my birthday. “*Where is it?*”

Ronan moved closer. “What is it?”

“My mom burned me on my sixteenth birthday.”

The entire room went electric.

I swallowed, forcing myself to meet their gazes. “Could she have burned off my mark?”

A frisson of hope slid through me.

Ronan shook his head. “It’s impossible to remove the mark by any method.”

That hope died, and pain ricocheted through me. “So, I’m some sort of supernatural dud?”

Declan squeezed me tighter. “Don’t talk about yourself like that.”

I shoved off his lap, needing space. “I don’t get it. If I don’t have any abilities, why did you bring me here?” It was only risking exposure for them when they didn’t need to.

The guys all shared a look, but it was Ronan who finally spoke.

“Because you’re our mate.”

“MATE?” I squeaked.

Ronan nodded. “Destined for all of us.”

My heart thudded against my ribs in a staccato beat. “*All of you.*” Images of Sam with her boyfriends in the hall flashed in my mind.

A smile played on Dash’s lips. “Every single one.”

There was that traitorous hope fluttering its wings in my chest again. I wanted it so badly to be true, but I was terrified to let myself believe it.

Colt moved closer. “An anchor isn’t always your true mate, but when they are, those bonds are that much stronger.”

“But I’m not an anchor, not really,” I said, disappointment flooding me.

Grief flashed through Colt’s expression. “You are. Just because you didn’t manifest doesn’t mean you aren’t an anchor. It doesn’t mean our mate bond won’t be incredibly powerful.”

“How do you know we’re mates?”

Declan’s gaze roamed over my face. “Don’t you feel it? That pull that doesn’t necessarily make logical sense?”

I swallowed against the dryness in my throat. “Yes.” How else did you explain me wanting to cuddle up to Trace, who had made me feel nothing but unwelcome since I got here? “But that could just be because you’re all gorgeous.”

The corner of Ronan’s mouth kicked up. “Thanks, Firecracker.”

“I’m being serious,” I chastised him. “A pull could be hormones.”

“It’s more than that,” Declan argued. “For us shifters, your scent tells us.”

A memory flashed in my mind. Colt's eyes flashing with specks of gold as he inhaled deeply, Ronan telling him to rein it in. "My scent tells you I'm your mate?"

Declan nodded. "It's indescribable in any sort of earthly terms. But it feels like being on fire and coming home all at once."

Pressure built behind my eyes. God, I wanted that. To belong to these guys. To have a place where I would be loved and cherished. Where I would be safe. To have people who I could love in return who would appreciate that love and not throw it away like common garbage.

I looked at Ronan, who gave a begrudging nod. "He's right. That's exactly how it feels."

Colt smiled at me. "I think I've known since the moment I met you. There's always been this deep need to protect you, to have you as close as possible. Whenever Dad and I would leave Michigan at the end of the summer, I'd be in a depression for weeks. I used to beg him to move us there full time so I could be near you."

I remembered the way the world would always look gray after Colt's departures. How the things I loved weren't quite as fun anymore.

I glanced at Dash, and he grinned. "I feel it here." He circled his sternum. "It's like a deep tug the moment you walk into the room. Like my heart is trying to get to yours."

My gaze jerked to Trace because that was exactly how I'd felt after the night of my attack. The night he'd held me.

Trace's face was a blank mask. "I know because they're my bond, and they're sure."

His words cut me to the quick.

Dash scowled at him. "Don't be an ass."

Trace shrugged. "I'm not going to lie to protect her feelings. I feel drawn to every female on the planet."

It was as if someone had jabbed a hot poker through my chest.

"Bullshit," Declan barked. "I've seen the way you look at her. Seen how you hover just out of sight to make sure she's okay. Don't spew bullshit in an attempt to keep Leighton at arm's length."

Trace's eyes blazed, that purple going molten. "You don't know a damn thing."

"I know more than you think. I know that what happened with Sarah wasn't your—"

Trace moved in a flash, pinning Declan to the wall with his hand around Declan's throat. "Don't you speak her name."

Colt and Dash hurried to pull Trace off Declan. He coughed and sputtered as Trace shook off Colt and Dash.

"Get off me!" The second Trace was free, he stormed out of the greenhouse.

A whole new kind of pain pulsed through me. Did he love someone else? Someone that he had chosen for himself? Not some random girl he'd been stuck with.

Ronan glared at his brother. "You can't go there."

A muscle in Declan's jaw ticked. "He needs to quit playing the martyr and pull his head out of his ass. He's hurting Leighton just to try to keep a distance that will never last."

Ronan let out a low growl. "You don't know Trace like we do. He needs time. Understanding."

"You all baby him. What he needs is someone to kick his ass."

"Enough," Colt said low. "This isn't the time."

"I'm not going to make anyone be with me," I whispered. "I would never do that. Would never want that."

Colt moved into my space, cupping my cheeks. "I know, LeeLee. But it's more than that. Our souls were woven from the same thread. There's only so long you can deny that."

A tear slipped free, cascading down my cheek. "I don't want to hurt him."

"I know." Colt pressed his forehead to mine. "This is a gift. I promise. It will help us all become who we were meant to be."

"Doesn't feel like that right now."

His thumbs swept across my cheeks as he pulled back. "Did you experience something the first time you touched us?"

My breath hitched.

"It was a vision, wasn't it?" Colt pressed.

"I thought it was just my imagination."

Colt shook his head. "It's so that you know you've met one of your mates."

My brow furrowed. "It looked like something from the past and something from the future."

He grinned. "I can't wait to hear what you saw."

“You can’t,” Dash chastised. “They’re for the mated pair only.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Colt waved him off.

“I don’t see how this can work.” Six people in a relationship? Not all of them overly excited about being forced into it? Trace was dead set against it, and I could tell Ronan had his reservations.

“It won’t work.”

The guys whirled at the sound of Darius’s voice as he strode into the room. He scowled at them all. “This is exactly what I warned you of. You exposed Leighton when she has no way of protecting herself.”

Colt’s lip curled. “We protected her.”

“Barely. And for how long?”

“Forever,” Declan vowed.

Darius shook his head. “She didn’t manifest. She’ll never be able to ground your powers. You want to descend into insanity?”

Everything in me twisted, panic setting in.

Dash glared at Darius. “We’re going to find another way.”

“There is no other way. You need an anchor who can tether you.”

The world slowed around me as snippets of conversations flitted through my mind. Ice slid through my veins. “Chloe. They expect you to bond with Chloe.”

The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them, nausea fast on their heels.

“Not bloody likely,” Colt snarled.

Darius’s eyes flashed. “You don’t have a choice. She’s the strongest we’ve got, and if you don’t, all you have in your future is madness and death.”

MADNESS AND DEATH. The words swirled around my brain in a brutal rhythm.

“We’re stronger than that,” Colt growled at Darius.

He shook his head. “Ones before you have tried. Followed their hearts instead of their sense. It ended in disaster.”

“What would happen?” I barely recognized my own voice. It was flat, void of any emotion.

Darius’s focus turned to me. “They are the chosen ones. The ones to lead our people. That means they have been gifted more strength and power than most. It makes them potentially unstable. An anchor becomes like a filter of sorts. She purifies their power so that it won’t pollute their minds and keeps them grounded to this world.”

“That’s what I was supposed to be.” A pain so raw and real stole my breath, taking root in my chest. I hadn’t even known that was supposed to be my purpose, and yet, losing it was amongst the greatest pain I’d experienced in my life. I wanted that purpose, that belonging.

Sympathy filled Darius’s expression. “It happens sometimes. We don’t know why. Maybe there isn’t enough magic in your lineage. Sometimes trauma prevents that magic from taking hold.”

My fingers curled in, nails pressing into my palms. “And they can bond with someone else?”

“We don’t want to bond with someone else,” Dash cut in.

Darius ignored him. “Bonding to an anchor is always a choice. We’ve tested the others in their generation. Only one is strong enough.”

Sickness, thick, black, and insidious, coated my insides. “Chloe.”

It was the only thing that made sense. Her propriety over the guys even though none of them showed any interest. Her hatred of me on sight. Her sense of entitlement over the entire school. She thought she was going to reign supreme over everyone one day.

“Chloe comes from a long line of anchors on both her father’s and mother’s side. The amount of power she can withstand is the greatest among us.”

“My mother is human, isn’t she?”

Darius nodded. “Your father has an incredible lineage, but you came along as a bit of a surprise.”

I swallowed hard. “You knew him?”

“I did. He was an incredible man. And that meant, when he learned your mother was pregnant, he gave up our world to raise you somewhere you would be safe. If you didn’t manifest, he didn’t want you anywhere near this place.” The last part was said with a look of censure at Colt.

Colt stalked toward Darius. “You don’t know what she was going through. What her mother was putting her through. We had to get her out.”

“And you could’ve done that without any contact with her,” Darius argued.

My heart clenched at the idea of never being reunited with Colt. Of never knowing Ronan, Dash, Trace, and Declan. But maybe that would’ve been easier. Because they had somehow become mine, and now, they were going to be ripped away. There was no other option.

“She’s our mate,” Declan snarled. “No one is going to keep her from us. We will figure out a way to anchor our powers, but she’s ours. If you or anyone else tries to come between us, you will pay.”

Darius didn’t seem cowed by Declan’s threats. “You can have her in your life. Even have a relationship with her, but you’ll bond with Chloe.”

Nausea slid through me. Share them with Chloe? I wouldn’t be able to do it, even if the relationship wasn’t sexual. She’d have a part of them I never would.

“That’ll never happen,” Declan growled.

Darius arched a brow. “And what does your father have to say about that?”

There was a flicker of something in Declan’s eyes, a mixture of rage and fear. “This isn’t something he can interfere with either.”

Darius snorted. “Have you told Patrick that?”

“Enough,” Ronan roared. “You’ve made your point. You can go now.”

Darius bristled. “You might be our future leaders, but you aren’t there yet. Remember that, *pup*.”

Ronan stretched to his full height. “I’m not your *pup*, and you’d do good to remember *that*.”

Darius’s amber eyes flashed. It wasn’t the gold I saw in Colt’s or Ronan’s eyes, but they still glowed. He didn’t say another word, simply stormed out of the conservatory.

“That went well,” Dash muttered.

“What did you expect?” Ronan snapped.

Colt moved toward me. “Don’t listen to Darius. He’s stuck in the old ways.”

Colt took my hands, his warmth bleeding into me. That heat hurt. The pain of knowing it wasn’t mine to relish in. “Don’t.”

Colt reared back. “You’re our mate. Finding you is a rare blessing. The fates wouldn’t be cruel enough to bless us with this and then make us walk away.”

But I knew he was wrong. Fate *was* exactly that cruel. Fate gave you the world’s most amazing father and then gave him a cancer that ate away at him in front of your eyes. Fate gave you the best friend you could imagine and then tore him out of your life. Fate gave you a mother that despised your very existence and left you with her to rot.

My gaze swept around the room, landing on each of the guys. My heart pulsed with each point of contact until I finally landed on Colt.

“I won’t be the reason you die.”

I’d rather live through endless lifetimes of my mother’s torture first. I wouldn’t cause their end simply because I selfishly wanted these stolen moments with them.

At the end of the day, I would always choose them over myself. Even if that left me completely and utterly alone.

I MOVED before any of them could stop me. I didn't want to hear their arguments or far-fetched plans to find a way around the mountain that stood in our way. I just needed out.

I bolted for the door and down the hall. My name echoed behind me, but I didn't stop. I ran for the stairs, heading to my bedroom, but pulled up short. This was the first place they'd come looking.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and I knew I was out of time. I dashed down the hallway, turning onto a corridor I'd never been down. There was a back staircase, but next to it was a skinny door. I hauled it open without thinking, hoping the guys would assume I'd gone for the stairs.

Closing it softly behind me, I blinked, trying to get my eyes to adjust to the light. A narrow, worn wooden staircase stood in front of me. The scents of must and dust filled my nose. I took the stairs slowly, careful not to make a sound.

When I reached the top, moonlight streamed in through various windows, illuminating the space. The attic was full of forgotten things, the perfect place for me. There were wooden chests and random furniture pieces lying around.

I crossed to a bed under a window that was covered in a sheet. Tugging the cover off, I climbed onto the mattress and hugged my knees to my chest. Pressure pulsed behind my eyes as I stared out the window at the black sea.

My mind was on overload. Too much information in too little time. But it wasn't the existence of shifters or casters or demons that was getting to me. It was that I belonged somewhere, and that had been stolen from me. The knowledge that I would likely never fit anywhere.

That was when the first tear fell. I let them come, silent daggers streaking down my skin.

I let everything free. I cried for everything I'd lost and everything that would be ripped away from me in the coming days and months and years. And when I was all cried out, I let sleep claim me.

I WOKE TO TWO SENSATIONS. Heat at my back, cocooning me, and a finger ghosting over my cheek as if tracing the tracks my tears had left behind.

My eyelids fluttered, and snapshots of Dash filled my vision.

"There she is." Dash's voice was rougher than I'd ever heard it. Full of emotion and pain.

"How'd you find me?" My own voice was raspy, as if someone had taken sandpaper to my vocal cords.

Colt's nose skimmed along my neck. "I'm a shifter. My sense of scent will lead me to you every time."

I let loose a curse in my mind. I'd have to remember that little trick.

"You shouldn't be here."

"You're here, so this is exactly where we should be," Dash said, his fingers still skimming my cheeks.

I shook my head. "It's only going to make it harder."

It was already agony, knowing their touches and caresses, their care. Having that ripped away was going to throw acid on the already brutal wound. If I let myself really have them, it would kill me.

Dash brought his forehead to mine. "We're going to find a way through this. We won't stop until we do."

That pressure began to build behind my eyes again. "This world has existed for centuries, right?" I knew that much from my research and seeing the founding families.

"Yes," he agreed.

"Don't you think someone would've found another way by now if it were out there?"

Colt's hand slipped under my tank top, his thumb drawing circles on my lower belly. "They weren't properly motivated. We are."

“You don’t think there were people who wanted freedom? Who cared for someone outside their bond?” I pressed.

Colt shook his head, his lips brushing against my neck. “Of course, there were. But there are no records of anyone knowing their mate and not being able to bond with her. The fates will reveal a way.”

My throat tightened. “I can’t risk you. I can’t let myself have you just because that’s what I want, knowing that it could mean your death. I’m not that selfish.”

Dash cupped my face, breathing me in. “Darius didn’t tell you the whole story. Losing your mate kills a part of your soul. You might be able to go on living but not as a whole person. We wouldn’t be good leaders because we’d have to harden our hearts to go on living. We’d lose our empathy and understanding. That is not who I’d want to be. Ever.”

Icy claws of dread dug into my chest. “What about Chloe? Doesn’t she have other supernaturals she was meant to anchor? Ones she might be mated to?”

Colt snorted. “She doesn’t know who they are but deserted them the moment The Assembly offered her a shot at us.”

My stomach clenched. Her poor mates. They didn’t even know they’d been all but abandoned.

Dash brushed his lips against mine. “I am fully me, the best version of myself, when I’m in union with you. I’m not willing to lose that, to lose a chance at a life with you, for the guarantee of power and a long life. I’d rather a day with you than a lifetime without you.”

My nose stung. “Dash...”

Colt’s lips skated along my skin. “He’s right. I can live a lifetime in just a few stolen moments with you.”

Dash’s finger traced along my lower lip. “Without you, I could become a monster. With you, I’m just who I was meant to be.”

My heart hammered against my ribs as my nerve endings came alive under their touch.

“Don’t take yourself away from us, Leighton. Please.”

There was a desperation in Dash’s voice that broke me. I met his blue eyes as he pulled back. “I’m not going anywhere.”

A DEVILISH SMILE spread across Dash's face. "Not going anywhere, huh?"

His gaze flashed to Colt. "Think we should put that to the test?"

Colt's fingers skated upward toward my breast, and it was then I was reminded that I wasn't wearing a bra.

"I think LeeLee deserves a reward for sticking with us." His voice sent a wave of vibrations over my skin.

"Definitely deserves a reward," Dash echoed. He grinned down at me. "You ready for that?"

I wasn't sure exactly what they were considering, but there was only one answer on the tip of my tongue. "Yes."

Dash's mouth met mine in a hungry kiss. As his tongue swept inside, his taste consumed me. It was something so uniquely Dash. Potent and heady, as if I were suddenly a little drunk. I wanted to drown in it.

Colt's hand palmed my breast, and he groaned. "So perfect." His hips pressed against my backside, arching into me on instinct as he hardened.

A little moan slipped free, which only spurred Dash on. His tongue dove deeper, taking every ounce of the sound.

He pulled back, a little breathless. "She likes that."

"What about this?" Colt's thumb and forefinger rolled my nipple into a tight bud.

A whimper escaped my lips, and Dash growled low. "I'm going to need to take a closer look."

His fingers closed around the waistband of my sweats, and he tugged them down, taking my panties with them. Suddenly, I was completely bare, and Dash was spreading my legs, settling between them.

I fought the urge to close them, to somehow cover myself.

Dash's gaze shot to mine. "Don't hide yourself from me."

There was an air of authority in Dash's voice that had me stilling and a shiver running through me.

Colt chuckled against the skin of my neck. "He's the most easygoing guy ninety percent of the time, but in this area...let's just say, Dash needs complete control."

Dash's finger traced a line up my inner thigh. "Did you know that the clit has over eight thousand nerve endings?"

I let out a tiny sound.

A grin spread across his face. "I'm going to make each one stand up and beg."

My core tightened, pulsing around nothing, but so desperately wanting to be filled.

Dash touched me with only that one finger, parting my center as he teased and explored. He inhaled deeply. "God, your smell."

Colt rolled his hips into me from behind. "I know. I can scent her from here."

My legs tried to close on instinct at that.

A stinging slap of three fingers came across my inner thigh, and I let out a yelp.

Dash pinned me with his stare. "Can you be trusted to stay still, or does Colt need to restrain you?"

Something about that mental image had a new rush of wetness gathering between my thighs.

Dash let out a low chuckle. "She likes that idea, Colt."

Colt pulled my tank top up, exposing my breasts. "I'd say so. Look at those pretty nipples standing at attention."

He licked his finger and circled one of the tightening buds. "Hard as diamonds."

"Her clit's going to be there next," Dash growled.

Without warning, Dash slid a finger inside me, and I whimpered. My core instantly pulsed around him, clenching down in pure need.

"Hell," Dash muttered. "She's like a vise. Can't fucking wait to feel her around my cock."

The thought of all of Dash filling me, moving inside me, had my hips moving of their own volition, seeking more.

His other hand tightened around my thigh. “Be still, mon coeur. You’re not ready for my punishments.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from moving. But God, I wanted to know what those punishments were.

Dash slid another finger inside me, and my mouth opened in a silent plea. He curled those fingers, and I couldn’t help but cry out as pleasure rocked through me.

“There she is. Going to map out every spot that brings you to the brink.”

Colt chuckled. “You think he’s kidding? He’ll probably draw out a diagram for all of us.”

Dash shrugged. “Science is man’s best friend.”

My inner walls began to tremble, and Dash tugged his fingers free. “Not yet, mon coeur. I’m not done playing.”

His fingers, slick with my wetness, circled my clit. The bundle of nerves swelled, trying to get to him.

Dash used one finger to press up the skin covering it. “So pretty. So ready.”

“Please.” I was begging, and I didn’t even care.

“Need something, mon coeur?”

Colt smiled against my neck as he tweaked my nipple. “Take pity on her, Dash. She’s still getting used to this.”

“Tell me what you want,” Dash said, his voice a husky promise.

“More,” I breathed.

“If you want to come, you need to ask nicely.”

“Please, Dash. I need to come.”

“That’s a good girl.”

Dash’s fingers slid back inside me in a flash, curling to hit that magical spot. He bent, his tongue flicking across my clit in tiny, little bursts.

I cried out as an explosion of sensation slammed into me. So much it was almost painful.

Dash’s lips closed around that bundle of nerves, and he sucked deep just as Colt pinched both my nipples. My core gripped Dash’s fingers so hard I swore they would break.

I rode each wave of pleasure on instinct, no control of my body, only holding on for dear life. Light flashed in front of my eyes. Something inside me snapped.

They were everywhere. The sensations they created were all around me and then inside me, embedding themselves so deep I knew they'd be a part of me forever. And then darkness descended.

VOICES TUGGED AT MY CONSCIOUSNESS. I was dressed now, cradled against someone's chest as he walked into a room. Dash, my senses told me.

"Your scents are all over each other," Ronan said, a hint of accusation in his voice.

"She's staying with us," Dash said by way of explanation.

"That won't do us much good if you break her," Ronan shot back.

My eyelids fluttered open. "Not broken," I mumbled.

Colt leaned over and pressed a kiss to my temple. "Of course, you're not. Just a little overstimulated."

I pressed my thighs together on instinct, and all the guys groaned. My eyes widened.

Dash grinned down at me. "The closer any of us get to you, the harder it is for all of us to stay away."

"Oh," I squeaked.

My gaze shot to Trace, whose jaw was granite and hands were fisted as if he wanted to tear the entire lounge apart.

Pain pricked at me, followed by a flood of guilt. "Sorry."

Declan leaned back in his chair, grinning wide. "Don't apologize. This is going to be so much fun."

I LOCKED my fingers together as we headed toward the school. Had it really only been a day since I'd been here last? It felt like a lifetime had passed in the past twenty-four hours. With all the revelations about the supernatural world, I'd barely had time to think about the dead rat in my locker.

Declan reached down and untwined my fingers, taking my hand. "It's going to be okay."

Colt nodded. "I had new security cameras put in around school that we'll have access to."

I turned toward him, my jaw going slightly slack. "The school let you do that?"

Ronan scoffed. "Who do you think funds the majority of the school?"

Colt shrugged. "It comes in handy now and then."

This really was a whole new world. I stilled. "Wait, is everyone at Castle Prep a supernatural?"

Colt nodded. "Mostly, or they are at least aware of us. But using our abilities on campus is forbidden."

Dash took my other hand and gave it a squeeze, leaning in to brush his lips across my temple. "We'll be sticking close today, too. Don't worry. No one will hurt you."

I couldn't help but notice the stares our fellow students gave us as we passed. Sam grinned, her boyfriends surrounding her, and gave me an encouraging wave. It was clear no one had missed the way that all the guys, except for Trace, were touching me.

My gaze pulled to him as we walked. As if he were acutely aware of my focus, his eyes tracked to me. He'd said very little since the events of last

night, but I got the feeling he wasn't on board with Colt's plan.

"Are you okay?" I asked softly.

His jaw worked back and forth. "Fine."

Because that sounded truthful. I worried the corner of my lip. "I'd never make you be with me if that isn't what you wanted."

The guys around me went unearthly silent as a muscle fluttered in Trace's cheek. Those violet eyes glowed brighter. "It has nothing to do with you. I don't want to be with anyone. Ever."

And with that, he took off toward the school building.

COACH CALHOUN BLEW HER WHISTLE. "We're running the mile today. Start stretching."

All the girls around me groaned. I guessed even going to a ridiculously expensive prep school couldn't save you from gym class. So far, we'd avoided any truly strenuous activity, but apparently, that was changing today.

"Get moving," Coach yelled.

I pushed to my feet. My shoulder was surprisingly fine after the attack last night. I shuddered at the reminder and began to stretch my quads.

Someone knocked into me from behind, and I barely caught myself from going flying.

"Oops. Didn't see you there, trash," Chloe crooned.

I rolled my eyes as her two henchmen stepped in behind her. I opted for ignoring them all and headed for the starting line.

"What? Cat got your tongue, trash?" Chloe called.

I shrugged. "Don't like to waste my time with people who clearly don't have two brain cells to rub together."

Heat hit Chloe's cheeks, and her nostrils flared. "At least I don't put people at risk because I'm a moron. They could've been killed because they were trying to protect *you*, and you were just throwing a hissy fit."

Each of her words hit like a carefully placed blow. I hadn't known I was putting the guys at risk, but the result was the same. And more than that, someone had obviously told Chloe the details of what had happened last

night. And there were only five other people who knew what had led up to the attack, the guys.

Chloe tossed her long, brown locks over her shoulder. “That’s what I thought. Stop messing with their lives. You weren’t meant for this world. Your anchor powers not manifesting is just proof of that. So run along, little freak, and let us be.”

She, Mimi, and Grace took off before I could say another word. The whistle blew, and girls started running. I forced my legs into action, but my whole body was numb.

I rounded the track four times, Coach calling out a series of numbers I couldn’t discern as I crossed the finish line. All I could hear were Chloe’s words echoing in my head, over and over again.

“All right, hit the showers. Anyone who got over twelve minutes, you’ll have to run it again,” Coach yelled.

I had no idea what I’d gotten. But I couldn’t find it in me to care.

I followed the throng of girls into the locker room, grabbing my gym bag and waiting for a shower stall. Chloe’s fake giggle carried across the space, grating against my skin.

When the girl in front of me exited the shower stall, I stepped in. I quickly ditched my gym clothes and stepped under the spray. I turned it as cold as it would go, careful not to get my hair wet.

The curtain yanked back, and I gasped, whirling around and trying to cover myself. Mimi burst out laughing. “I told you. God, what happened to you? Those are disgusting,” she said, her gaze zeroing in on the scars on my side.

Chloe scrunched up her nose. “You really are a freak, aren’t you? Do you honestly think any of *my* guys would want to touch you with skin like that?” She gave an exaggerated shiver.

Grace grinned and held up her phone, snapping a photo. “Maybe we should show them to make sure they know how grateful they should be to have avoided being stuck with her.”

I lurched for the phone, and Grace shrieked. “Get away from me, freak.”

Hot, angry tears built in my eyes as I grabbed my towel, trying to cover myself.

“Thank God,” Chloe muttered. “Looking at your deformed body is enough to make me sick.”

It shouldn't have hurt. Cruelty coming from such an ugly person was never a shock. But it was just one thing too much, and I could feel my mental walls beginning to fracture. Laughter carried through the girls in the locker room. Not all of them but enough.

The weight of it pressed in on me, and I couldn't breathe.

Mimi laughed. "Oh, geez. Is she going to *cry*?"

I battled to keep the tears at bay, not wanting to give them an ounce of satisfaction, but I couldn't get air into my lungs. My hands began to tingle, and dark spots danced in front of my vision. Panic grabbed hold, seizing my muscles to the point of pain.

The door crashed open, the banging sound making everyone jump. And then Trace was there.

"I'm going to kill you."

CHLOE GAPPED AT HIM. “We didn’t do anything! She just started flipping out because she’s such a freak.”

A small, quiet girl stepped forward, her hands shaking as she approached Trace. “She’s lying. Chloe and her friends pulled back the shower curtain. They were making fun of Leighton’s scars. Grace took a picture on her phone.”

Trace whirled on Grace. “Give me your phone. Now.”

“No! You can’t just take it. That little bitch is lying.”

The trio glared at the younger girl, who was trembling now.

Purple fire rose to Trace’s hand. “Give me the phone, or I’ll give you your own scars.”

Grace yelped and threw the phone at Trace. “You can’t use your powers on school grounds. You can’t threaten me!”

Trace incinerated the phone mid-air, then turned to face Chloe. He stalked toward her slowly. Each step he took, his eyes glowed brighter with a fury that had everyone frozen to the spot.

“You think I don’t know this is all you?”

Chloe’s hands began to tremble. “It was just a joke. Someone needed to show Leighton her place. She’s not one of us, Trace.”

Purple sparks danced around Trace’s fingertips. “She means more to us than you ever will. And you know it. That’s why you’re pulling this stunt. But what you didn’t think about was the fact that hurting Leighton would only make us hate you.”

Chloe looked as if she’d been slapped. “Trace...”

He stalked forward another step, the locker room deathly silent. “Before, we didn’t give a damn about you. You were just this annoying bitch always buzzing around, not taking the fucking hint that we didn’t want anything to do with you. But now you’ve crossed the line. You’ve hurt what’s ours. Our most sacred gift. I should gut you where you stand.”

Mimi took three large steps away from Chloe.

Chloe’s gaze jumped around the room. “It wasn’t my idea. Mimi’s the one that pulled the curtain back.”

Mimi gaped at her friend. “You told me to do it!”

“Shut up,” Trace barked, and they both froze.

His gaze tracked over Mimi. “You’ve always been pathetic, begging for my cock. Did you know that I only touch people I despise? Only those I’m absolutely fine with breaking. That’s why I touched you. But even then, I didn’t want your disgusting fingers on me.”

“Mimi?!” Chloe shrieked.

Mimi had turned the shade of a tomato. “T-that’s not true. We have something special. You know I’m never with anyone but you.”

Trace scoffed. “You’re disposable. An outlet for an overflow of magic. A dumpster.”

“You hooked up with my bond?!” Chloe screamed.

Trace turned toward her. “I’m not yours. I never will be. But your little posse has been trying to get my dick from the moment you set your sights on us. So, you might want to make better choices when it comes to friends...”

I swore steam came out of Chloe’s ears. “You’re going to pay for that,” she spat at Grace and Mimi.

“The only one paying here is you,” Trace growled. Purple fire flared to life in his palm, then shot out, engulfing the ends of Chloe’s hair.

She screamed in terror.

A second later, Trace called it back, but it was too late. The lower half of Chloe’s precious hair was gone and what was left was smoking.

“Get out of my sight before I take your skin next,” Trace snarled.

Chloe bolted from the locker room, tears streaming down her face. The rest of the girls hurried after her.

The room was silent except for the water still running in my shower. Trace crossed to it and turned off the water. I didn’t move, nothing but the wave of shivers coursing through my body.

Trace made his way slowly toward me, as if approaching an injured animal. “Leighton?”

I wanted to say something, I wasn’t even sure what, but no words came out.

Concern streaked through Trace’s expression as he ducked down to make eye contact. “Look at me, Little Bird.”

I tried, but I couldn’t quite make my eyes focus. Trace was blurry around the edges.

“I’m going to help you, all right? Is it okay if I touch you?”

I nodded robotically.

Trace moved, wrapping me in a towel and picking me up in one fluid motion. He grabbed my gym bag and strode from the main locker room into a smaller office that I assumed belonged to Coach. He sank onto a small sofa and curled me into him.

The moment his arms encircled me, a peaceful buzz lit somewhere deep. It zipped through my system, easing the worst of the shock and pain.

“Just breathe, Little Bird. I’ve got you.”

“Why?” I croaked.

He pulled back, his brow furrowing. “Why?”

“Why did you come?” He didn’t even particularly like me.

Trace’s jaw hardened. “I could feel your distress. Knew something was wrong.”

“Feel it?”

He nodded and rubbed at a spot along his sternum. “I knew it wasn’t physical danger, but I could feel your heart hurting.”

Tears filled my eyes. “I can’t take any more.”

Trace cupped my face, the contact intensifying the buzz in my system. “Yes, you can. You’re the strongest person I know.”

“I’ve only let you guys see my scars. I don’t—I didn’t want anyone to know.”

Rage pulsed in his eyes. “No one is going to say a damn thing.”

I wished I could believe Trace, but gossip had a way of getting around.

“Their reaction, their eyes, it’s like burning alive all over again.”

Trace froze, and then he pressed his forehead to mine. “I’m so sorry, Little Bird. I’d take every ounce of pain if I could. I wish I’d been there. I’d give anything to have stopped it.”

A heady high swept around me as Trace's scent filled my lungs. A dark lilac scent that made me want to dive deeper.

His hand slipped into the opening of my towel, and his fingers traced the gnarled skin. "You're the most beautiful being I've ever seen. These are just a part of that beauty. A part of your strength."

My gaze locked with his. "Am I disposable?"

Trace reared back.

"You said you only touch people who are disposable, who you despise."

Trace's thumb skimmed the edge of my bottom lip. "Sometimes I wish I could despise you. It would make it easier."

My chest constricted, making it hard to breathe. "Make what easier?"

"Staying away from you."

I didn't look away from him, silently pleading for answers.

"If I keep touching you like I want,"—his fingers traced my scars—"I'll break you, Little Bird."

MY HEART HAMMERED against my ribs. “You’re not going to hurt me.”

Trace shook his head. “You don’t know that. I’ve broken someone before. Shattered them so that the pieces aren’t recognizable.”

I opened my mouth to ask a million other questions when the door to the office banged open and four pissed off males charged inside. They came up short as they took in me in Trace’s arms.

“What happened?” Ronan growled.

I expected Trace to immediately set me down, to create distance between us. But he didn’t. If anything, his hold on me tightened. “Chloe and her bitch squad decided to expose Leighton’s scars.”

Growls filled the air.

Dash moved in, crouching in front of me. “Are you okay? Did they hurt you?”

“I’m all right.” I wasn’t sure if that was completely true, but I didn’t want to upset Dash.

Colt crossed to us, his hand skimming my arm in a gesture of comfort. “I’m so sorry, LeeLee. I’ll fix this. I promise.”

“You need to get your alpha off the Chloe train, stat,” Trace snarled.

Colt’s gaze snapped to him. “I’ve told him it’s not happening, but there’s nothing else I can do. Darius is determined that this is the only answer.”

“You’re more dominant than him. It’s time that you step into that power,” Trace gritted out.

Colt’s jaw tightened. “I’m not going to challenge him. I’m not ready to take over the pack. Not yet.”

“You might not have a choice,” Declan said, but his gaze didn’t leave me, worry filling his eyes. “And that could be true for all of us.”

The guys were quiet, the weight of Declan’s words heavy in the air.

“Someone told Chloe what happened yesterday,” I said.

Ronan’s hands fisted. “Explain.”

“She knew that I’d run off, that a shadow demon had attacked. It felt like she knew things that only we know.”

Ronan cursed. “None of us would say a damn thing to her, but we had to make a full report to The Assembly. We always do when there’s a shadow demon attack. Her father has connections there. Someone probably told him.”

A little of the tension winding through me eased.

Ronan ran a finger over my bare shoulder. “We’d never betray you like that.”

My throat tightened. “I’m sorry I put you all in danger. It could’ve been so much worse.”

Dash squeezed my knee. “None of this was your fault. You didn’t know.”

“Don’t let Chloe’s lies fill your head,” Trace growled.

I glanced up at him. “How did you know?”

“I’m familiar with her particular brand of bullshit.” Trace looked around the room. “She’s getting bolder. We’re going to have to deal with her.”

Declan grinned. “From what we heard, you already have. Don’t think that precious hair is ever going to be the same. And I’m pretty sure you scared the shit out of her.”

Ronan shook his head. “Girls like Chloe react one of two ways. This will make her tuck tail and run, or she’ll lash out even worse than before.”

A low rumbling sound escaped Trace’s throat. “If she makes a move on Leighton again, I will end her. I don’t care what treaties are in place.”

Colt pushed to his feet. “You can’t. You know it. We need all the clans at our back with everything going on. The attacks are just getting bolder.”

“Attacks?” I asked.

Colt shared a look with the rest of the guys. “The shadow demons have been systematically going after our strongholds. Almost as if they have inside information.”

“It’s the damn vamps,” Ronan snarled.

“I don’t think so,” Dash argued. “They’ve been cut off from our information grid.”

“So, they have informants,” Ronan pressed back.

“Who it is doesn’t matter right now,” Colt cut them off. “What matters is that we have all the backup we can get. And if Trace slices and dices the prom queen, we’re going to lose some of that support.”

Ronan leaned against Coach’s desk. “I can do it without anyone being the wiser.”

Declan scoffed. “Of course, you can.”

Ronan glared at his brother, rage pulsing there.

“It’s too risky,” Colt bit out. “We do what we can without permanent bodily harm. I’m already going to have to smooth tempers after Trace’s stunt today.”

“You didn’t see her.” Trace’s voice was low, but it carried so much emotion. “She was shaking like a damn leaf while those bitches taunted her. No one goes after my mate like that.”

The guys’ eyes widened.

“Oh, shit,” Declan muttered. “Is he imprinting already?”

Colt slowly approached us. “You need to let her go, Trace.”

Trace’s chest heaved beneath me. “I can’t.”

Curses filled the room.

Colt glanced at Dash. “You got your bag of tricks?”

Dash nodded. “Always.” He turned to Trace. “I’m gonna help you, okay?”

Trace’s grip on me tightened to the point of pain. “Hurry. You don’t have much longer.”

“I got you.” Dash closed his eyes, murmuring something I couldn’t understand, and then a vial appeared in his hand. He poured some powder into his palm and then blew it into Trace’s face.

In a matter of seconds, Trace’s hold on me loosened. Colt scooped me out of his arms and carried me out of the office. “You guys deal with him. We need to get some distance between them.”

Pain flared to life in my chest, as if my very heart were being ripped out. I clawed at Colt, trying to get free, to get back to Trace. Because some part of me knew, it wasn’t my own pain I was feeling, it was Trace’s.

I STARED down at the bowl as I attacked the chocolate batter like a woman possessed. I could've just used the KitchenAid mixer, but I needed the burn of mixing by hand. I'd be lucky if the whisk didn't break.

"What did that bowl ever do to you?"

Declan's voice skated over my skin in a pleasant shiver.

"Is he okay?" I asked.

Colt had taken me home while the rest of the guys had dealt with whatever was happening with Trace. While the pain in my chest had eased, I could still sense that he wasn't doing well.

Declan moved in next to me and dipped his finger into the chocolate cake batter, licking it clean. "Damn, that's good."

I set the bowl down and leaned a hip on the counter. "Dec..."

He sighed. "He'll be fine. He just needs a little distance right now."

"From me."

It wasn't a question, yet it held a million unknowns. I kept walking this line of wanting to know everything but not wanting to push. Trace and his issues. Declan and Ronan's history. What happened to Colt's father? Dash's family.

Declan turned to face me. "What do you know about incubi?"

"Nothing. I didn't grow up in this world. I feel like I'm fumbling around in the dark and everyone thinks I'm an idiot."

He winced. "I'm sorry. None of us want to overwhelm you. We know it's a lot to take in."

"I want to know, to understand, even if I didn't come into my own powers." Saying it hurt. This thing I'd never known should be mine, but I

felt the loss of it just the same.

Declan slid a hand under my hair and squeezed my neck. “You’re perfect just the way you are.”

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t. Because my not manifesting could end in disaster for all of us.

“We’re going to figure it out,” Declan promised. “We’ll find a way.”

“I hope you’re right.” And if he wasn’t, I’d leave. It didn’t matter how much it hurt. I would rip my own heart out if it meant keeping them safe.

Declan gave my neck one more squeeze and released me. “We told you incubi get their power from sexual contact. That they’ll die without it.”

I nodded, nausea sweeping through me. “I can’t imagine being forced into that.”

“It makes things complicated, that’s for sure. But it’s more than that.”

I studied Declan as he seemed to choose his words carefully.

“When an incubus is intimate in any way with someone, that contact has an addictive quality.”

My brows pulled together. “For him or the other person?”

“In most cases, just for the other person. If they get that hit too much, they can become addicted to it.”

A weight settled low in my belly. “And if they don’t get it?”

Declan met my gaze, uncertainty in his. “They go insane.”

My pulse thrummed in my neck. “Has Trace made someone go insane?”

Declan was quiet for a long moment. “Yes.”

That fluttering in my neck picked up speed. “Who?”

“I can’t, Leighton. It’s not my place. I’ve probably already told you too much, but I wanted you to understand. If I tell you more, it’ll break the trust I’m trying to build. These guys already don’t like me. That would make it so much worse.”

“It’s okay,” I hurried to say. I didn’t want to push Declan into anything that would hurt his relationship with his bond. But something didn’t make sense. “Today, Trace was in pain. I could feel it.”

Declan’s eyes widened. “You felt it?”

I nodded, rubbing at that spot along my sternum. “Right here. I don’t know how to describe it, but I knew it was coming from him. And he felt when I was panicking in the locker room.”

Declan cursed.

“What?” A little of that panic flared to life again.

“When an incubus meets his mate, every point of contact, physical or emotional, builds the imprinting process.”

“Imprinting?”

Declan traced the lines in the marble with his finger. “It’s the mating process. It brings the two of you closer until the bond is complete. But it can make incubi unstable while it’s taking place. Especially if there’s a lot of physical contact.”

And Trace had been holding me in his arms, caressing my scars. There’d been physical and emotional intimacy of sorts.

“And then it hurts him when there’s distance?” I asked.

“Exactly.”

“But he doesn’t want to be with me. Not really. He’s being forced into it.”

Declan let out a breath. “He wants it, but he’s scared.”

“Of what?”

“That he’ll hurt you.”

My stomach cramped. “He won’t.”

Declan pulled me against him, wrapping his arms around me. “That’s what I think, too. Mates shouldn’t have the ability to hurt one another when they’re in harmony.”

I didn’t miss the operative word there. *Harmony*. Getting to that place with Trace would take time. And I needed to be sure that the guys could anchor their powers some other way. Otherwise, I was going to have to leave.

Declan’s fingers skated along the ridges of my spine through my tank top. “You’re thinking pretty hard over there.”

I sighed. “Just trying to figure out how it’s all going to work out.”

Declan pulled back a fraction so he could see my face. “All we can focus on is the next step.”

“And what’s the next step right now?”

He grinned, sticking his finger in the cake batter. He painted the chocolate across my lips. “We make a cake.”

My tongue flicked out to catch the sweetness, and Declan’s finger darted inside. My reaction was total instinct. I sucked it clean.

Declan let out a groan as his hips pressed into me, his cock hardening. “Leighton...”

I released his finger, looking up into those silver-gray eyes. “Hmm?”

He dipped his finger back into the batter. “Such innocence on that face, but you’re a little minx.” He trailed chocolate across my collarbone and lapped it up with his tongue.

My mouth opened in a pant as my thighs clenched. “I didn’t do anything...”

Declan pulled down the strap of my tank top, his lips gliding over my skin. “I think you know exactly your effect on me. On all of us.”

I gasped as Declan tugged the other strap down, and my breasts popped free. “We’re in the kitchen,” I hissed.

He grinned at me as his thumb and forefinger found my nipple and rolled. “That’s part of the fun. Who’s home? Who could walk in at any time?”

Declan took another swipe of batter and painted it across my other nipple. “The perfect dessert.”

His head lowered, and he sucked me into his mouth. Sparks of pleasure zapped from nipple to clit.

“Dec,” I breathed.

He released me. “Love it when you call me that.”

Declan’s fingers snaked into the hem of my sweats, and he pulled them down. And then he was lifting me, setting me on the marble counter. The stone was freezing against my overheated skin, and I sucked in a breath as he parted my thighs, my sweats and panties falling to the floor.

Declan trailed a finger along my center. “So damn beautiful.”

My breath came in short pants.

He arched a brow. “Going to stay still and let me have my dessert?”

I swallowed hard. “Yes.”

Declan’s eyes melted into that silver I loved. “Good girl.”

He took a finger doused in batter and trailed it from my inner thigh to my core. As his lips closed around my skin, teasing and sucking, a whimper escaped my lips.

“No moving,” Declan growled.

My fingers curled around the counter, the edge of the marble biting into my palm. But that hint of pain was what I needed to keep still.

Declan’s tongue snaked out and flicked my clit.

I bit the inside of my lip to keep from crying out.

“The perfect salty and sweet,” he crooned.

“Please...”

“What do you need?” Declan asked, his voice husky.

“Release.”

I needed to let go of all the pressure that had built up over this day. To release it all.

Declan chuckled against my center, the vibrations nearly sending me over the edge. “I can do that.”

Two fingers slid inside me as his lips closed around my clit. Those digits curled and twisted in a staccato beat that had my thighs and inner walls trembling.

“Dec...” His name was a whispered prayer on my lips.

His fingers pressed hard on that spot inside me as he sucked my clit harder.

I shattered, my voice lifting on the air as Declan milked every wave of pleasure. Just as I thought we were done, another wave would build and crest. By the time they eased, my entire body was trembling.

Declan grinned up at me. “Feel better?”

“I don’t think I can feel anything at all right now.” I was human Jell-O.

He chuckled. “Let’s get you upstairs.” Then his devilish smile was back. “But I’m bringing the cake batter.”

I WOKE with a heavy arm thrown over me. Declan's scent of fresh rain and mint filled my nose, and I burrowed back against him. He'd stayed. All night. And I hadn't had a single nightmare.

"Mmmmm. Like waking up like this," he mumbled.

The words *waking up* had my eyes flying to the clock on my bedside table. "Crap!"

I threw the covers back and flew out of bed and toward the closet.

"Hey, where you going?" Declan called.

"We're gonna be late. Why didn't anyone knock on my door?"

He lumbered out of bed. "Someone did, but I didn't want to get up."

I gaped at him as I pulled on a fresh uniform. "You should've woken me."

Declan shrugged as he followed me into the bathroom. "School's overrated."

"Not for those of us who'd like to get college scholarships," I grumbled around my toothbrush.

He leaned a hip on the counter. "Scholarship, huh? What do you want to major in?"

I rinsed my toothbrush. "I'm not totally sure. Something that will get me a good job after school."

Declan grabbed my toothbrush, squirted some toothpaste on it, and started brushing his teeth.

My nose scrunched. "That was just in my mouth."

He arched a brow. "And my mouth was between those pretty little legs all night. Don't think we need to worry about swapping a little saliva."

My cheeks heated. “Hurry up, would you?”

Declan chuckled as he grabbed the clothes he’d discarded yesterday and pulled them on. When he straightened, he reached out to try to scratch behind Briar’s ear. She hissed and swatted him.

He snatched his hand back. “Geez, she’s feisty.”

I gave Briar a scolding look. “That’s not very nice.”

She simply licked her paw as if to say, “*Whatever*”.

We hurried out of my room and down the stairs. All the guys were waiting.

Ronan’s jaw ticked as he took in his brother, and my stomach dropped. The idea of the two of them sharing a candy bar was a stretch. Sharing a partner seemed impossible.

Colt arched a brow at me. “Left a bit of a mess in the kitchen.”

My face flamed. “I’m sorry. I can clean it up—”

He shook his head. “Already dealt with it.”

Dash smirked at me and Declan. “I’d say they *both* left a mess.” He reached out and picked something out of my hair. “Got a little chocolate there...”

I covered my face with my hands, and Dash burst out laughing, then pulled me into a hug. “It’s good, mon coeur. We need a little levity around here.”

That had my gaze seeking out Trace. “Are you okay?”

His jaw clenched. “I’ll be fine.”

Which meant he wasn’t right now. And he didn’t need anyone bringing up my sexual exploits.

“Let’s go,” I said, then paused. “Do you want me to ride in a separate car?”

“No,” Trace growled. “You ride with me.”

Okay, then.

We all filed out of the house. Instead of the usual Range Rover, there was a souped-up Escalade. It looked swanky with the same blacked-out windows.

Colt swung a set of keys around his finger. “Thought we needed something with a little more room.”

My heart clenched as I looked at Declan. I didn’t miss the gleam of hope in his eyes. This was the first step of them welcoming him in.

We climbed into the SUV. Dash and Declan took the back row, Ronan and I in the middle, and Colt and Trace in the front, as usual.

As Colt started down the drive, Declan leaned forward. “How was the meeting with Darius?”

My stomach tightened as I waited for Colt to answer. But the tensing of his fingers on the wheel didn’t give me the warm fuzzies.

“He’s not swaying, neither are any of The Assembly elders. They think Chloe is our best option.”

My heart thudded against my ribs. “Who are the elders?” Maybe if I could focus on an endless stream of questions, I could ignore the fact that Chloe might be the only one who could keep them alive.

Ronan shifted to face me. “There’s one from each clan. Someone who has been around for centuries and is supposed to have the gifts of wisdom and discernment.”

“Centuries?” I squeaked.

Dash chuckled. “Did we forget to mention that we live a *really* long time?”

“Like how long?”

“Usually about five hundred years,” Declan offered nonchalantly.

“Will I live that long?”

The SUV was quiet.

Colt’s gaze met mine through the rearview mirror. “We don’t know.”

Just one more thing stacked against us.

I was quiet the rest of the drive to school, mulling over these newest revelations. By the time we reached campus, my insides were tied in a knot.

Ronan leaned over and pressed his lips to my temple. “We’ll find a way.”

I wanted to believe him, wanted to believe I could have all of this, but I wasn’t so sure.

We climbed out of the SUV, the guys surrounding me. Trace took the spot furthest from me, and it killed, even though I knew it was likely for the best. Declan’s words from yesterday swirled in my mind.

Trace had the weight of a gift with a dark side. I had no idea what it was like to live every day with that. But my heart ached for him.

Students parted as someone stalked through the crowd. Blonde hair flew in disarray around Mimi’s head, and there was a frantic look in her eyes.

“You!” she screeched at me as she charged forward. “You ruined everything! Chloe won’t even talk to me.” Panic leaked into her voice. “She’s going to lead the anchors, and you made her hate me!”

Trace stepped into Mimi’s path. “Don’t. Don’t even look at her. You want to be pissed at someone, that’s me. But fair warning, princess. I fight back.”

Redness crept up her neck. “You’re just as bad! I can’t believe I wasted so much time on you. And for what?”

“Some earth-shattering orgasms, I’d guess,” Ronan drawled.

The idea made me sick to my stomach, but I shoved it down. It wasn’t Trace’s fault. It wasn’t even his choice, but it didn’t change that I hated it all just the same.

Mimi’s eyes sparked with rage. “So, you’ve got some talented fingers. So what? Anyone who’s with you will hate themselves. Because they know the truth. That you ruin every person you touch. That you’re a monster. A murderer.”

Each word from Mimi’s mouth sliced at Trace. I could feel each blow as if it were my own.

“Who would actually want you as their damned mate, Trace? You’re a curse. A—”

I couldn’t take it. I charged forward, my fist lashing out without me consciously moving. My knuckles smashed into Mimi’s nose with a satisfying crunch.

She howled in pain as she collapsed to the floor, blood gushing everywhere.

The guys turned and gaped at me. Ronan was the first to start laughing. “Firecracker, that was a thing of beauty.”

The shock of the moment faded, and I cursed as pain radiated up my arm. I shook out my hand. “Shit! That hurts. Why don’t they tell you punching someone hurts?”

Trace took my hand. His fingers were so gentle it made my heart ache. “Little Bird. Why?”

The pain eased at the contact with Trace. “No one gets to spew lies about you when I’m around.”

Those violet eyes blazed as his chest heaved. “I was wrong. I think it’s you who’s going to ruin me.”

“*I THINK it’s you who’s going to ruin me.*” The words echoed round and round in my head. Each pass carved the words deeper into my very bones.

“Uh, Leighton?”

Connor’s voice brought me out of my daze. “Sorry, what?”

My homeroom pal chuckled. “You were really somewhere else there.”

I blew out a breath, fluttering the pages of my bio textbook. Connor had offered to help me study after school while the guys had yet another meeting with The Assembly elders. Declan thought it might help if all of them were present.

“There’s been a lot going on lately.” *Understatement of the century.*

Connor eyed the two hulking guards sitting at the library table behind us. “I’m gathering that.”

I glanced over my shoulder at the security and fought the urge to sink lower into my chair. After everything we’d been through, I understood why it was necessary, but it was slightly embarrassing. I hated the fact that most of the students could protect themselves, but I couldn’t.

“What’s that face for?”

I turned back to Connor. “It’s no fun being a dud.”

His brow furrowed. “A dud?”

“No powers. No way to defend myself like the rest of you.” When I’d peppered Declan with questions, he’d explained that anchors typically took on some of their bond’s powers, just to a lesser degree.

“Ah. I get it. But trust me, not all of us are as powerful as your bond there.”

I leaned back in my chair. “What do you mean?”

Connor shrugged. “I’m pretty much the lowest of the low in dragon ranks. I didn’t even have enough power to make it into one of the bonds. Guess I didn’t need an anchor.”

Guilt slid through me. I’d been so focused on feeling sorry for myself, I’d missed the fact that I wasn’t the only one going through things. “But if you don’t have an anchor, that means you’re free in a way, doesn’t it?”

His mouth pulled into a hint of a smile. “I guess it does in a way. But everyone looks down on you.”

“Declan and Ronan don’t, do they?”

Connor was quiet for a moment. “No, they don’t pull the crap a lot of the horde does.”

“Horde?” I asked.

“All our clans are different. The wolves are a pack. We’re a horde.”

I nodded. “I’m sorry people are crappy. It says something about them, not you.”

He gave me one of his typical goofy smiles. “Thanks. Now, mitosis and miosis...”

I groaned and covered my face. “Shouldn’t I get a pass on AP Bio when my entire world was just turned upside down?”

Connor laughed. “I wish, but the teachers around here are kind of hard-asses.”

He was right. They might not blink an eye at our absences, but they weren’t going easy on us in the grades department. And I needed a backup plan if everything here went south.

“Well, aren’t you two *cozy*. Do the guys know you’re fucking around on them already?”

Chloe’s voice had my head lifting. A chill skated over my skin as I followed the arm slung over her shoulders to a familiar face. Damien grinned at me, but it looked like more of a snarl.

The two guards rose from their chairs.

Damien rolled his eyes as he tugged Chloe tighter to his side. “Colt always was a drama queen. Two guards for this waste of space?”

“Back off,” Connor growled low.

Damien laughed. “What are you going to do about it? You can barely shift.”

“What do you want?” I flicked my gaze to Chloe. “Nice haircut, by the way.”

Pink hit her cheeks as she reached up to finger the ends of her bob. I guessed Trace's fire trick left the girl with only so many options.

Chloe straightened out of Damien's hold. "I just wanted to share a little information with you. Girl-to-girl."

Unease trickled through me. "I don't want to hear whatever lies and bullshit are about to fall from your mouth. Just run along and enjoy your life of misery."

Her eyes flashed. "They're not lies, and seeing how it's about your precious little roommates, you might be interested."

Damien picked at the edge of one of his nails. "I'd listen to her, Leighton. Might change how you feel about things."

My pulse sped up, thrumming along my neck.

A smile stretched across Chloe's face. "Daddy had a long talk with Darius today. He learned all sorts of things."

One of the guards stepped forward. "We should go. Mr. Carrington wouldn't want you exposed to this. And he wouldn't want you around the vamp."

That unease swirling inside me amplified.

Chloe snorted. "I bet he wouldn't. Because it would be a shame if Leighton found out that they knew where she was all this time. That they never came for her because she didn't show any signs of manifesting. That they only showed up when they did because someone saw her mom slap her. It would've been bad for business if your mom got arrested for child abuse. Who knows what she would've told the cops. That's why we don't get involved with humans. They can expose our secrets."

Chloe turned to me, her smile widening. "They knew you were a weakling and didn't want anything to do with you. You were just a liability that needed to be handled."

My ears started to ring. Colt knew where I was. They all had. They knew I was alone in the world, and they hadn't come. Because they hadn't cared. They only cared now because the mating urges had set in, not because they actually wanted me.

I stared at Chloe, eyes burning, but I knew in my bones it was the truth. She was too gleeful for it not to be. And suddenly, I was more alone than I'd ever been before.

THE TWO GUARDS hustled me out to their waiting SUV. I hadn't gotten out another word in the library. Not a single one. Everything around me had a hazy quality to it, and as I climbed into the back seat, I realized that I'd gone numb. My fingers had that pins-and-needles sensation that happened when you lost blood flow.

As the two guards got into the front of the SUV, the one in the passenger seat pulled out his phone.

"Don't call them." My words snapped out like a whip.

The guy froze, and the second guard pulled out of our parking space. "I need to let Mr. Carrington know what happened."

"I'll let him know what happened."

The two of them shared a look.

My back teeth ground together. "You're taking me back to The Nest, aren't you?" I couldn't bear to call it home, even though that was what I'd begun to think of it as. If what Chloe said was true, it had never been my home.

"Yes, ma'am," the guard driving said.

"And the guys are there?" I pressed.

"Everyone but Declan. He's meeting with his father," the second guard said.

"Then they'll know soon enough."

They shared another look as the SUV pulled onto the two-lane highway. The guard in the passenger seat began typing on his phone.

"If you send that text message, I will throw myself from this vehicle, and you can explain to Colt why."

It was a complete asshole move. The guy was just doing his job, but I was desperate. My only shot at the truth was if the guys weren't prepared, then I could get their honest reactions.

The guard driving glanced at his compatriot. "Put your phone away, Mac. We'll be there soon enough."

Mac frowned. "He's gonna be pissed."

The driver shrugged. "Maybe he shouldn't have kept so many secrets."

I felt an instant kindredness with the man, but it was followed by a sickening dread coursing through me. *Secrets*. So many I was drowning in them.

At the speed we were going, it didn't take long for us to reach The Nest. The moment the SUV slowed, I was out of the vehicle and striding toward the front door. Opening it, I stepped inside and listened. Voices came from down the hall in the direction of the lounge.

I headed that way just shy of a run. The moment I stormed into the room, four sets of eyes swung to me.

Colt was on his feet in a flash. "What happened?"

"Did you know where I was this whole time?" The tremble in my voice gave me away. My fury. My grief. My betrayal.

The guys froze.

"What do you mean?" Colt asked slowly.

His nonanswer made my hands fist, fingernails pricking at my palms. "It's a simple question. Did you know where I was?"

My heart thudded against my ribs as I prayed for him to say no. You didn't leave someone with the mother you knew despised them if you loved that person. If they were your mate, a part of your soul. Not if you cared even the slightest bit. You didn't leave them alone when you knew their world had been ripped apart.

No one said a word.

The pressure behind my eyes built. "Don't be a bunch of cowards."

Ronan's eyes flashed. "We knew where you were."

His words sliced across my heart.

"Did you not come for me because I didn't have the power you needed?" My voice was even, deceptively calm.

Colt held up a hand as if placating a child. "We wanted to protect you from this life. We were looking out for you—"

"If I had manifested, would you have come for me?"

Silence reigned. In each beat of the nothingness, memories assaulted me. Every beating and act of cruelty. Every time I went cold and hungry.

“Would you have come for me?” My voice was eerily quiet.

Grief etched itself into Colt’s face. “Yes.”

That single word was the death blow.

I couldn’t stop the tears that crested over my eyes and down my cheeks. They were like silent razor blades, leaving carnage in their wake.

Colt stepped forward, Dash on his heels, as if they were going to comfort me.

“Don’t touch me!” I threw up my hands as if I could ward them off. If they touched me, it would be agony.

The panic in my tone halted Colt and Dash in their tracks.

I let the tears fall, not bothering to brush them away. “I’m going to pack my stuff and go. If one of the guards could take me to the bus station, I’d appreciate it.”

Trace was on his feet in a flash, the first real panic I’d ever seen in his expression. “You can’t leave. You’ve been exposed to our world. People would come after you.”

“If I stayed here, that might be true. But I’m going to do what I do best...disappear.”

Ronan’s teeth ground together. “You can’t. They’d find you.”

Anger heated my blood, battling back some of the sadness. “Don’t pretend like you give a damn. You certainly didn’t when I was getting the shit beat out of me every single day. When I was terrified Maryanne’s boyfriend would escalate from disgusting comments to so much worse.”

They all looked as if they’d been slapped.

Dash stepped forward. “Leighton, please.”

“Don’t,” I snapped. “Just don’t. I’m not going to believe anything you say, so just...don’t.”

I was so tired. Of everything.

Colt’s face closed down. There was no emotion in it at all. “You’re not leaving.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. It’s too risky.”

Because I was a loose end to him, nothing more. “Good to know where you stand.”

His hazel eyes flashed gold. “Leighton...I’m trying to keep you safe.”

No. He was trying to protect himself.

I couldn't stand to look at them anymore. I turned on my heel and stormed out of the lounge. Dash called my name, but I didn't listen. I charged up the stairs and into my bedroom, slamming the door behind me.

Briar let out a growl from her cat tower at the disturbance.

I paced the length of the room, fury eating away at my grief. I knew the anger wouldn't last. The truth of what I'd lost, of what I'd never had, would make its way back into my body, into my soul, and I'd be in agony again. I had to get out of here before that hit.

"I need a plan." I muttered the words over and over, as I thought about all the security I'd have to get past. Coming to a stop in front of Briar, I sank my hands into her fur. She was so happy here. Even if she tried attacking most of the guys, she loved her cat tower and special food that Baldwin got her.

"I can't take you with me," I whispered. They'd never let me on the bus with her, and I was going to have to move quick. "Once I'm settled, I'll come back for you." Because once they realized I really could disappear, they'd let me go. It would be easier for all of us. They could bond with Chloe and live happily ever after.

The thought had me running for the bathroom. I emptied the contents of my stomach into the toilet. I heaved over and over again until there was nothing left. Still, the retching continued. When it finally stopped, I was exhausted.

Pushing to my feet, I brushed my teeth and washed my face. I moved on autopilot, packing a couple changes of clothes and the memory keepsakes of my father into my backpack. Then I crossed to the window seat.

I studied the backyard. It was too open. Even if I didn't break my neck jumping out the window, someone would spot me making a run for it. I headed for my closet. There was a skinny window at the back of it. I slid it open and peeked outside. Jackpot.

A gutter pipe ran down the side of the house, and there was far more tree coverage there. But I'd have to wait until dark. Until everyone was asleep.

Pain flared to life in my chest at the thought of leaving. *It's a lie. Everything you're feeling is nothing but a manipulation.* I chanted the words over and over until I could convince myself I believed them.

Crossing back to my bedroom, I lifted Briar and cuddled her to my chest. I held her as the sky went dark and the house became silent. I held her as I waited another two hours just to be safe. And then I kissed her head. “I love you.”

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dropped it on the bed. The guys would only use it to track me.

Forcing myself to keep moving, I picked up my backpack and headed for the closet. Getting through the window was a feat in itself. Grabbing hold of the gutter pipe, I lowered myself out of it. But then I made the mistake of looking down.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“One step at a time,” I whispered. So painfully slowly, I slid down the pipe. I landed with an oomph and froze, listening. Whistling sounded from around the house, and I ran for the trees.

Just as I ducked behind one, a guard appeared. His gaze roamed the area, but it glanced right past me, and I breathed a sigh of relief. This was my shot.

I ran through the trees, branches slapping at my skin. When I reached the dip in the land that I knew meant the end of the Carrington property, I breathed easier, deeper. I slid down the hillside until I reached a side road.

I was free. I just needed to get to the bus station. I had enough money for a ticket to wherever I wanted to go.

I took two steps before movement in the trees caught my eye. But it was too late. The first blow sent me stumbling back and light flickering in my vision. The second sent me crumpling to the ground. Darkness pulled at me as a voice sounded.

“Told you she’d run.”

I knew that voice. Knew it meant nothing good. But it was too late...

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